LOVE

SHORT STORIES

July 25¢

Miss Fixit's Mistake
by ANN BARRON

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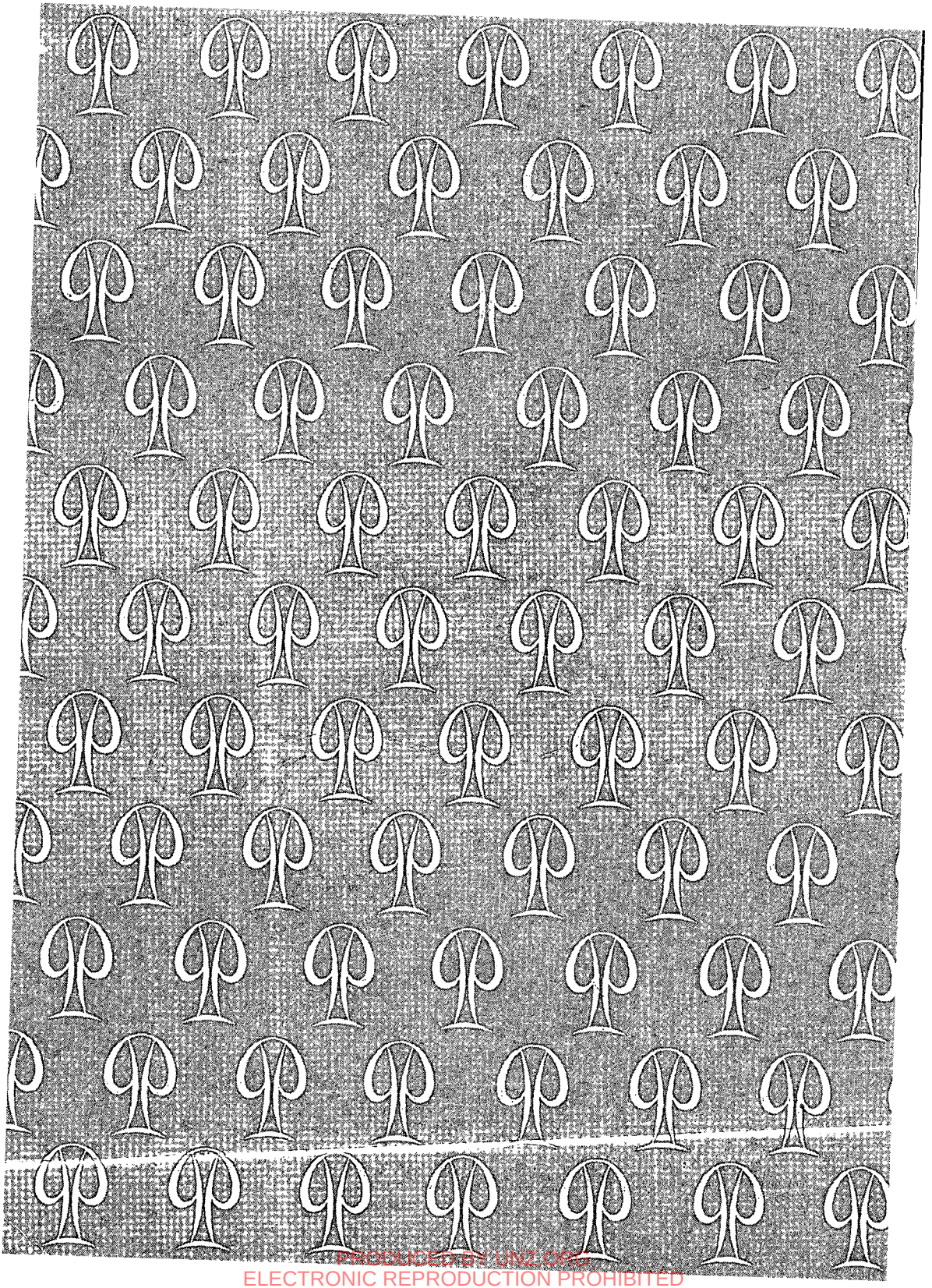

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LOVE SHORT STORIES

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Miss Fixit's Mistake

by Ann Barron

. . . was a foolish error that suddenly became the wisest step in her life.

SUSAN ROLLISON was unaware of it, but she was about to grow herself a heaping peck of trouble. Ordinarily, she would have grinned amiably at the young man who stopped at her desk, for hers was a warm and impudent heart, light as thistledown.

But on this bright Monday morning in March, the seeds of trouble, planted over three months before, at last took root. An unaccustomed asperity firmed her tender mouth and cooled the tilted, changeable eyes.

The young man began appreciatively, "Say, who are you?"

Susan had known that would be next. It was an established pattern. Now he would lean over her desk, accidentally shoving aside the polished wooden block that read plainly: "S. Rollison, Director of Social Activities." After three years at her job with Southwestern University and a steady parade of such tall, intense young men, Susan knew the formula by heart. Usually she sent them away smiling, after her teasing gesture toward the Tau Phi fraternity pin that rested lightly on pale pink wool just over her heart.

Beyond his sweatered shoulders she glimpsed the look of timid yearning directed their way. It came from Miss Theresa O'Ryan, who stood behind the mahogany counter that separated the rest of the office force from the reception area and Susan's desk.

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She gave her alert admirer a frosty glance. "I'm an old maid," she said coldly, "an ill-tempered, embittered old maid."

From September into March, Susan Rollison had been conscious of those quickly averted glances of wistful longing that Miss O'Ryan cast on her. She scarcely knew the mousy O'Ryan with her outdated blonde pompadour and brown, thick brows. But with sudden violence she wished that just once, one of the young men would lean across the counter and look appreciatively at O'Ryan.

They never did. Now this one was looking at Susan in wounded astonishment.

"It doesn't show," he said shortly, fumbling to straighten the wooden block, "until you talk."

He glanced at the name and title on the block and muttered, "How anti-social can you get." Then he stalked stiffly over to O'Ryan's counter.

Susan was a little ashamed, but not much. The student was conducting his business with O'Ryan now, without really seeing the eager girl or her outmoded hairstyle.

While she and Theresa O'Ryan were not intimate, there were certain inescapable bits of knowledge Susan had picked up about this girl who was working her way through Southwestern University as a clerk in the business office.

She was twenty-one, exactly Susan's age, but unlike Susan whose father had a well-established insurance agency, she had worked nearly all her life. O'Ryan was grimly determined to get an education.

Susan knew intuitively that O'Ryan was hoping there might be a little of the fun she had missed scattered along her collegiate way. But O'Ryan had worked so long she had forgotten how to play. In some inexplicable manner, the male students seemed to sense it. Something ought to be done about it, thought Susan, because it wasn't fair.

For here was Susan Rollison, blessed with a charm that had put her in her present position when only a sophomore. It had kept her there at two fifty per month after graduation, with a commensurate raise in responsibilities. She could take no credit for being born with a saucy, sunny nature that paved her way through college, and which had been the basis for innumerable gay encounters that resulted in her crowning achievement—Bricker Radford. Brick was famous throughout the southwest—a flashy example of razzle-dazzle football at its All-American best. He was less famous as a six-year law student and it was his fraternity pin that built a fence around Susan's heart.

Like an echo to her thought, Brick shouldered his way through the heavy glass door dividing the business office from the rest of the Administration Building.

"Hi, wonderful." He shoved the wooden block askew and draped his big frame over a corner of her desk. "What're you working on—the Tau Phi dance?"

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SUSAN'S SMILE was a little forced. Even the auburn-thatched Brick looked different to her this morning. "Sure am, Brick." She tried to sound insouciant as she gathered the papers scattered in front of her. Her job consisted of helping make arrangements for every social activity that took place in oil-rich Southwestern U and this was the first time she could recall it tasting sour.

All at once she was afraid. "Rex Richardson and his Saturday Night Bobcats. Yacht Room of the Athletic Club." She added with false gaiety, "How's that sound?"

"With you in my arms—yum-yum." Brick expanded his big chest happily. He straightened abruptly as a lean, casual man pushed through the door. He muttered to Susan, "Oho, the genius of the galaxies, 'Gee-offry' Laurence." Then with loud courtesy, he added "Good morning, Professor." Susan nodded also.

Professor of Astronomy Jeff Laurence returned their greetings indifferently and went directly to the mahogany counter where O'Ryan fluttered happily in response to his inquiry for mail.

"Twenty-eight years," Brick mumbled disgustedly, "and he's spent nearly all of it making cosmic diagrams and love to a telescope. I don't like that guy."

"Why?" Susan's gray-green gaze narrowed on the broad gray gabardine back across from them.

"Co-ed's delight!" Brick snorted, "What all the girls see in him, I can't . . . "

Susan chuckled. "You're just not used to sharing your limelight, All-American."

"Ha!" Brick launched himself on the defensive. At that moment, on the way out with his mail, Laurence's black eyes touched Susan's, clung briefly before he went out the door. Her heart tightened momentarily, her pulse quickened and she scarcely heard Brick's low-voiced diatribe as her mind skipped back to the first time she had met that dark gaze.

It was in a crowded elevator. She had worn a silly hat with a long, insolent feather rearing Pocahontas-like from the back of it. Conscious of a tittering and giggling in the crowd behind her, Susan had restrained a desire to look around.

The laughter increased and all at once a thunderous sneeze roared over her head. She whirled and looked up into the grim face of Geoffry Laurence. He was valiantly stifling another sneeze and his stare at her hat was baleful.

It dawned on her then. The tall, impudent feather had been brushing the end of his nose.

Her first inclination to laugh had faded under his stern glance. The amusement of the crowd added to her quick chagrin.

She said lamely, "Why didn't you move?"

"If you observe the condition of this elevator, madam," he responded ironically, "you'll note that such a course is a physical impossibility."

With mingled emotions she wrenched off her offending headgear,

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rumpling her dark hair as she did so. She was sharply conscious of being pressed tightly against him. It seemed that she could almost feel his slow, even breath as he drew it. It made her own appear quicker by contrast.

She had recognized him immediately, of course. The newly endowed Department of Astronomy, complete with its superb observatory atop Cavu Hill, had given his arrival wide publicity. The Sunday *Star-Telegram* had published a whole page of pictures showing the observatory, the smiling Sid Carter, publisher and oil operator who had donated a million dollars for it, and a likeness of the young but eminent Professor.

During the following three months her discomfiture faded, but the seeds of a strange discontent took root and flourished on the memory of those quizzical dark eyes. Susan's younger brother Mike helped in this, by constantly extolling Jeff Laurence's virtues, his remarks, his experiences. Mike was a freshman, astronomy was his avowed career and Professor Laurence was his idol.

Now, as Susan's eyes followed Laurence's wide shoulders out the Business Office door, she thought involuntarily, He's wonderful. Then suddenly aware of Brick's suspicious eyes, her mind added hastily, For Theresa O'Ryan.

With widening eyes she looked up into Brick's lowering countenance as the idea of fixing up a romance for pleasure-starved O'Ryan took on velocity.

"Susan," Brick said warily, "you've got that look you had when you put one of Digby Purcell's pet white mice in Ellie Peabody's purse."

"And now they're going steady!" Susan was gleeful. She had always been too busy having fun to play Cupid before. Now she felt just as if she had invented something, so clear was her vision of a starry-eyed O'Ryan.

"Ha. You mean Dig and the mouse, of course." Brick grinned. "Ellie gave him back his pin this morning. Said he and the mouse were well-suited."

Susan looked crestfallen, then philosophic. "Oh well, Ellie could be right. Now tell me who you Tau Phis have picked to be chaperons for your footrace." She paused, then added, "Beside Professor Laurence." It was part of her plan that he should have to go. It would facilitate her getting him to agree to a date.

"How'd you know he was one of them?" Brick's brown eyes narrowed.

"He's young, for one thing." Susan felt better and better. "And he's likely to let you get away with nearly anything."

"I still don't like the guy," Brick said coldly.

"Who do you like?" Susan wrinkled her nose provocatively.

"You," he said, as she had known he would. He leaned over, sniffing her hair and making a whinnying noise.

"Hey, the office force is looking," Susan spoke almost sharply.

"Let them look." Brick winked

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wickedly. "It'll give those little gals a big thrill."

"You're a conceited lug." Susan laughed tolerantly. He squared his big shoulders and with the peculiar grace of a football star, swaggered out of the office. The feminine sighs from behind the mahogany counter were almost, but not quite, audible after his departure.

The long, austin-limestone Rollison home on Stadium Drive was just the right distance from the campus. It was Susan's custom to walk home in good weather. Her homeward stride had a bounce in it. If everything worked as planned this morning, O'Ryan's wistful eyes under the uncropped gold wheatfields of her brows would no longer peer hungrily at Susan. A week from today they should be misty with inner excitement. Then the old, happy contentment Susan had known for four college years would return.

At dinner that evening, she surveyed the cozy circle of her family with a secret pleasure. Mom and Dad, placidly eating, had no idea of the excitement burning inside her. And Mike Rollison Junior—Mike was waving a drumstick earnestly.

"And he studied at Palomar for two years, Dad. Why, he's a personal friend of Professor Carl Hubbell's." Mike spoke with awe. "Today he explained Richard Tolman's theory that the Universe started from the explosion of a super-atom, and it will expand . . . "

Susan focussed suddenly on his words. "Who's this?"

"Professor Laurence, of course," Mike said shortly. "And it'll expand only until the outward, repulsive motion is balanced by the inward, attractive motion . . . "

"Does he ever work late at the observatory?" Susan interrupted once again.

"On every clear night, Susan, and quit interrupting." Mike turned back to Mike senior, who repressed a smile. "Then the Universe must fall back in upon itself, with increasing velocity, until another super-atom is created and from that another explosion which starts the process all over again."

"Is he friendly?" Susan asked.

MIKE GLARED. "Is he what?"

"Friendly. You know. How are you, what d'you know, sure look nice today. All that sort of stuff."

"Shut up, Susan," Mike said coldly. "Listen Dad, there are two forces at work in the Universe, basically. One of attraction and one of repulsion and . . . "

"I'm sure that's true, son." Mike senior grinned. "This conversation repulses me. Whereas, the prospect of a piece of your mother's lemon pie attracts me. That should prove the theory."

"That only proves you're a mundane gourmet, dear," Elizabeth Rollison said calmly and began cutting large slices of the white and gold peaked confection on her left.

Later, Susan slipped into a pale yellow cardigan and pushed her feet into tan leather moccasins. After

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further casual questioning, Mike had told her the professor was nearly always in the observatory on clear nights until midnight and past. It couldn't be much clearer than tonight, she thought, hunching into her boxy wool coat.

She peeked out her bedroom window. No moon, but the wind had polished every star until it dripped fat, juicy twinkles. She was going to walk up Cavu Hill and pay the lean and enigmatic Jeff Laurence a call. She had carefully inferred a trip to the drugstore for bobbypins after dinner and the family took no notice of her departure.

Outside it smelled good. Looking up at the heavens, Susan laughed at Mike's talk. What did it matter anyway if those stars rushed toward or away from her? Let the next billion years worry about whether the Universe was expanding or not. In a few minutes she was going to smile her way into a man's confidence and renew her pleasure in life. Her footsteps quickened at the recollection of that dreadful feeling of pointlessness that had followed her so frequently in the past three months.

Approaching the observatory through the sycamore trees at the foot of Cavu Hill, she could see the long finger of the big telescope pointing curiously into the vast arch of heaven. The convex silver dome that housed that probing, far-seeing tube had an odd other-world quality about it.

Susan's steps slowed and she inhaled deeply of the gusty March night. This place of science was Carter Observatory. There was a Carter Hall and a Carter Auditorium. Fort Arlington's cultural centers were nearly all due to Sid Carter's generosity, the price tag being only a plaque with the name Carter inscribed. Susan grinned. A real City Father with fine brick sons, she thought.

Going up the smooth granite steps and pushing open the heavy door, she had the peculiar sensation of leaving a known sphere for an unknown one, as if she were standing on the threshold of some new and marvelous experience.

Inside the observatory, her feet in their rubber-soled shoes made no sound. The silence was disturbing and the light seemed unusually dim at the end of the long hallway. It glinted dully off a metal staircase that wound upward to the seeking eye of the telescope itself.

Padding to where the hall blossomed into a vast, high-domed study room, Susan's eyes met a series of broad tables. At one of them, with his long legs wound around a longer stool, Jeff Laurence bent over a litter of papers under the strong light of a goosenecked lamp. She stood uncertain for a moment, conscious of an alien shyness. She had been going to call, Hi, star-gazer.

Instead she spoke almost hesitantly. "Hello, Professor Laurence."

He looked across the table, his black eyes running over her with unexpected recognition. "It's S. Rollison, isn't it?" It was the first time Susan had ever seen his slow, even

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smile. He added, "The Sweetheart of Southwestern."

Susan's cheeks stung. So he had heard about that silly election when she was a senior last year.

HE MOTIONED TO the stool next to him. "What brings you up here?"

Looking at his black, careless hair, she perched on the stool and tried to regain her customary pertness.

"I came to find out how you feel about love and romance." She twinkled suddenly. A direct approach was one of Susan's most devastating weapons. "Do you approve or disapprove of them?"

She knew he was surprised. She had intended to surprise him, but she had not intended that his dark scrutiny should be so close. She lowered her eyes.

In a low voice he said, "Shall I demonstrate my views on the subject?"

She looked up in a panic. Without the gray gabardine coat, his shoulders beneath a thin white nylon shirt were exceedingly wide and purposeful. So was his expression.

"Oh, that won't be necessary." Her laugh was nervous. "I—it's the Tau Phi formal this week-end. I've never seen you take a date to any of the dances and I thought—well, I mean I wondered if you were a woman-hater or . . ."

"A misanthrope?" He was smiling. "No. I like my work. It doesn't leave me much time to cultivate feminine companionship."

"Then you wouldn't refuse a nice girl for this one?"

"No. Not a nice girl."

Her sigh of relief was almost audible. "Then it's all settled." Really, she thought, the man had put her in a swivet. Her saucy system was out of kilter and her usual gay repartee was clattering along like a crutch. In another moment she would be babbling.

It was that moment that the trouble, the whole peck of it that she had innocently grown for herself, fell on her.

"What time shall I call for you, S. Rollison?" His words fell incredibly into the soft, intimate silence of the observatory study room.

She looked into his dark, amused face with lips parted in amazement. In her tizzy she had failed to mention O'Ryan!

Her eyes followed his as he rose. He was looking at her mouth with a scientist's singleness of purpose. A warm tide of weakness surged through her.

When he slipped his hands under her elbows and pulled her near, she sank against him in a confusion of feeling. He was making no effort to kiss her.

Instead, he murmured into the soft puff of her bangs, "I've admired you a long time, Miss S. Rollison."

"The name is Susan," she said helplessly. This was what she got for treating a man like a boy. It was a startling discovery.

His chuckle started something inside her turning over slowly, like be-

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ing on a roller-coaster that had creaked to the highest peak and was poised for the drop.

"You're such a gay, uninhibited little extrovert—like sunlight and laughter. It never occurred to me that you might find me interesting." He released her.

Sure, she thought dizzily, that's me—uninhibited to the point of idiocy. How could she tell him about O'Ryan now, with him looking like he had just discovered a brand new solar system? Worse still, how could she explain this to Brick?

He held her hands lightly. His were warm and dry. "You're wonderful, Susan."

"I—but I'm not." She felt like a worm.

"Anyway you're the nicest thing that's happened to me in quite a while." He let her hands go and she felt suddenly lost.

"Why don't you show me around this place, Professor Laurence?" She was babbling now. "I've been wanting to go through it for ages."

"Can't I qualify as Jeff," he teased, "now that we've made a date?"

AFTER THAT, HE had taken her on a complete tour. She marveled at the exquisite perfection of the planetarium wing. When he put her in the observer's seat behind the big telescope itself, the feel of his shoulder pressing hers was forever threaded with the unearthly beauty of Mars, suspended before her eye like a pearl against a black velvet sky.

It was an hour of enchantment and it wrought unseen changes in Susan Rollison.

Tuesday rolled around inevitably and with it rolled Brick. At her desk, Susan plunged bravely into explanations but Brick was not receptive to the amusing angle she tried to capture. His cold dislike of Jeff Laurence took on warmth.

"You mean you let that limber-legged tube-peeper talk you into letting him take you to the dance?" He glowered at her. "Where does that leave me?"

Dismissing her attempt at humor, Susan tried coolness. "It would have put me in an extremely awkward position to have told him about O'Ryan. Especially after he jumped to the conclusion it was me."

"Sure. And I'm in the extremely awkward position of having my girl turn up with a flying saucer specialist."

Knowing there was a certain justification for Brick's outrage made it hard for her to argue. She said, "Listen, Brick, he thinks I asked him to . . ." Her eyes began to glint. "Hey, I'm getting an idea."

"Oh, no you don't. Not again." Brick slid off the desk with such alacrity he sent the wooden nameplate skittering to the floor. Theresa O'Ryan, passing by on her way to lunch, picked it up and timorously held it out to Brick. Her big blue eyes were filled with shy admiration.

After she disappeared, Susan said, "Brick, you bring O'Ryan to that dance."

"I will not. All those eyebrows and

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that hair. She looks like a disappointed lapdog."

"O'Ryan's a diamond in the rough," Susan said fiercely. "I'm going to polish her up between now and that dance. And when you get there with her, the boys will be fighting to dance with her."

"Not me." Brick was decisive. "You're my dish."

Susan stooped to conquer. "Look at it this way, Brick darling." Her tilted, black-fringed eyes rested on him meltingly. "You're so popular and famous, if you take her it's just like a guarantee. Everyone knows that you won't settle for anything but the best and that'll give O'Ryan a marvelous start."

"Why, Suse, you're flattering me." Brick's slow grin wiped the sulk from his ruddy face.

"But it's true, Brick, and you know it." Susan pulled her trump card, "And when the prof sees what a belle our O'Ryan is, he won't mind when you and I sort of juggle them together and team with each other."

"Suse," Brick said admiringly, "you are a sneaking, conniving woman and I love you. It's a deal."

SUSAN OBSERVED HIS broad shoulders departing and was uneasy. She felt, as Brick had suggested, conniving and it was not a good feeling. And she had another obstacle. Three, really, she decided. O'Ryan's eyebrows, both of them, and her hair. Something had to be done about all three.

It was an insight to Susan's character that the other three Rollisons were only mildly surprised Wednesday afternoon when Susan pulled a round-eyed Theresa O'Ryan through the front door, hastily introduced her and retreated busily to her bedroom.

But O'Ryan had been more than surprised by Susan's sudden interest. She had been astonished. She had also been willing, ever eager.

Now, wielding the tweezers with fierce joy, Susan murmured, "O'Ryan, Saturday night, you'll spend the night with me. Brick will pick you up at eight. We'll darken these long eyelashes of yours and I want you to bat them like crazy."

Theresa giggled.

"And don't giggle," Susan admonished, surveying her handiwork and feeling a satisfaction she hadn't felt since she mowed the front yard single handed at the age of fourteen. "Just bat your eyelashes and smile. Sultry-like."

Taking up the scissors, Susan made great inroads on the pompadour.

"Shouldn't I try to carry on light and witty conversation while we dance?" O'Ryan asked anxiously.

"Just wave the eyelashes," Susan replied inexorably, "and the men'll make the light and witty talk."

When Susan and Theresa appeared in the University business office Thursday morning, the Dean looked at O'Ryan without recognition for the space of a breath. Then a pleased expression started in his eyes and spread down to his jowls.

Susan sat down at her desk with a feeling of extreme satisfaction. She had done well by O'Ryan. She even

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whistled softly as she dialed the number of the caterer of the Tri-Delta Spring Rush Tea.

Finishing, she hung up as Digby Purcell came in to stand beside her desk. He looked morose.

"Guess you know Ellie gave me back my pin."

"It's a shame, Dig," Susan was sympathetic, "What happened?"

"She doesn't like white mice, even though they did bring us together," he answered gloomily. "Why Suse, they're the dearest, most unobtrusive, clean little pets you . . ." He halted, his idle gaze latching suddenly on Theresa. "Hey, who's the new dish?"

"You know O'Ryan, Dig. She's been here since September."

"Never noticed. Gosh, she's beautiful! How about . . ."

"Hiya, Dig." It was Brick, blowing in like a strong west wind and his all inclusive smile rested approvingly on O'Ryan, after touching Susan lightly. "See my date for the Saturday night buck and wing?" He jerked his thumb meaningly toward O'Ryan.

"Aww," Digby murmured. "I might have known. But hey, how about you and Suse . . ." He broke off reddening. "None of my business of course."

"Just an experiment, Dig." Susan's laugh was more airy than she felt. "Brick and I want to see if it's true that variety's the spice of life. Jeff Laurence is taking me to the dance."

Digby Purcell's intelligent brown eyes twinkled appreciatively. "The Astronomy prof! Suse, that'll kill the female contingent. You should know how many babes have angled for that hard-to-get character."

"Hard-to-get!" Brick said acidly. "That observatory nurse has been romancing telescopes so long, he's forgotten that women are for . . ."

"Level off, gentlemen," Susan murmured, "Dean's coming out of his lair."

The two young men straightened up like privates on the entry of a general and O'Ryan, who had been a surreptitious listener, grew very busy.

When the Dean had stalked into the outer hall, Digby muttered, "Got to amble. See you later."

Leaving, he put his hand into a voluminous pocket in his jacket and pulled out a small white mouse. He stroked it tenderly and Theresa O'Ryan stared transfixed, her lovely new mouth agape and her blue eyes under the new eyebrows glistening strangely.

OBSERVING THIS, BRICK looked back around at Susan skeptically. "If that tomato proves untasty, Sunshine, to the point of being a dud," he said low, "our deal is off—way off."

Susan whispered in sudden rage, "Brick Radford if you're unsporting or rude to O'Ryan—if you treat her mean, I'll never forgive you."

"Listen," he said arrogantly, "girls are a dime a dozen. Maybe you need reminding of it, Susan." Eyes narrow and lips sardonic, he turned away.

With mingled emotions, Susan observed his nonchalant departure. She was no longer suffering from the dusty feeling of futility, as in the past

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three months. But the change didn't seem to be for the better.

Even looking into Theresa O'Ryan's exalted new face across the lunch table in Eeny's Beanery failed to restore her earlier sense of satisfaction.

"I can't thank you enough, Susan," Theresa was saying earnestly. "You've done so much, even lending me your beautiful gold formal. You've fixed . . ."

"Forget it, O'Ryan," Susan said moodily. "We don't know whether I've done you a favor or not, yet."

O'Ryan was peering experimentally into her compact and pushing at the soft gold aureole framing her unfamiliar features. Susan was touched with an odd wonder. For an unguarded moment a flash of near-envy shot through her that anyone could look so sublimely happy over the prospect of a little college fun. It was so much the same, year after year. In the fifth year of it, Susan knew.

"It's a favor all right," O'Ryan said with certainty as she snapped the compact shut, "any way you look at it."

Crossing the campus on their way back to the administrative offices, Susan glanced up at the sycamore trees arching over the flagstoned path. Already their silvery spotted limbs wore a chartreuse veil. Spring always came early in Fort Arlington. Even the bermuda grass was showing a timid green.

Susan wished glumly that her own outlook was as bright as the big, buff buildings in the noon sunlight.

"Who was that man with the mouse, Susan?" O'Ryan asked diffidently as they went into the Administration building.

Had Susan been less preoccupied with her own troubles, she would have recognized an odd note in O'Ryan's question. But she said, "Digby Purcell, a nice guy with a big intellect but a small talent for women."

"Oh."

By four-thirty, Susan had finished making final arrangements for the buffet supper to be served at the Tau Phi dance Saturday night. She was a little tired and as she closed her desk, she looked up to see Jeff Laurence stride in. This time her reaction was proper, due to the strict schooling she had been giving it since their last meeting.

"Hi, star-gazer." She hoped it sounded properly casual.

A smile started in his dark eyes and moved slowly along the curve of his lips.

"Is this visit social or business?" she asked briskly.

"Social. I'd like to drive you home."

"That's nice of you, Jeff, but it's just a good walk." No use letting this thing get any more involved than it already was.

"Not the route I had in mind." There was an elusive quality in his smile, as if he knew more than he told. It drew Susan irresistibly toward him.

"Well, I . . ." She hesitated. By rights, it should be O'Ryan receiving this male magnetism. She felt guilty,

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but she said, "All right. Let's go."

When they crossed the street to Faculty Row, she gestured at the red brick, white-shuttered buildings and asked, "You live in the brain-barracks, Jeff?"

He shook his head. "Parkhill Apartments downtown. I park my car in front of the brain-barracks."

He opened the door of a light green, club coupe. It was not exactly conservative and it was an expensive car. But it was last year's model and very different from Brick's canary-colored convertible.

Driving through heavy afternoon traffic, he did not speak and for the life of her Susan could think of none of her ready chatter.

"Where are we going, Jeff?" She asked at last.

"The Farmhouse. They serve steaks two inches thick. After admiring you from a distance for six months, I'd like to admire you up closer—over a cup of *cafe royale*, maybe." There was a smoothness about him that had nothing to do with the staccato campus sophistication Susan knew so well.

After that talk came easy, and Susan didn't realize they had driven forty miles across rolling prairie countryside before they came to The Farmhouse. It was what the name implied—a converted farm home at the end of a mile of old, stately cedars.

In a little while, Susan was setting down her empty cocktail glass to lean across the red-checked tablecloth and smile into Jeff's eyes.

"Know something?" she said dreamily, "It's like I'd known you for years. I feel relaxed and yet interested around you. And that's a funny combination—relaxation and interest."

HIS SUDDEN LAUGHTER was an odd mixture of tenderness and understanding. "How old are you, Susan?"

"Almost twenty-two. And I don't know what coffee royal is. Isn't that scandalous?"

"I'll teach you." His black eyes gleamed with amusement but his voice was gentle.

And he did. When dinner was over and the steaming cups set before them, the waiter brought a bottle of old brandy. Jeff poured a tablespoon full of the brandy, then set the spoon gently on the surface of the coffee where it seeped evenly across the top of the cup. Striking a match, he put it to the mixture and a blue flame danced lazily over the liquid for several moments. Susan watched, fascinated.

When she sipped it, the coffee had a delicate scorched flavor—delicious and warming.

She sighed. "All I know about you, Jeff, is what my brother Mike tells me—theories on attraction and repulsion in the universe, super atoms that explode and—and coffee royal."

"What would you like to know, Susan?"

"Everything."

"Born in Ponca City, Oklahoma, studied astronomy at the University of Chicago, got my Master's at Cal Tech and worked at Palomar two

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years before coming to Southwestern. Will that do?"

She shook her head. Susan did not drink often and any remaining reticence was lost in the rising warmth of the brandied coffee. "What's your favorite food? What do you like to read? Do you swim, play tennis?"

"Save something for next time, Susan. Everything's more enjoyable when it's done leisurely. Do you know that you're still growing up?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're like a little girl in a hurry. Impatient." His dark eyes held restraint as they touched hers. "It's part of your charm," he continued, "but it's the promise of what you'll grow up to be that makes you irresistible."

Susan looked at him dizzily. He didn't talk like a man who had jumped to the egotistical conclusion he was being asked for a date. He talked like a man in love, winningly and persuasively.

When Jeff Laurence left her at her door a little after ten, she found the rest of the family in the den. Her father had built a fire in the fireplace and the three of them were comfortably reading.

Elizabeth Rollison looked at her daughter in mild reproof. "You didn't call and tell us you weren't coming home for dinner."

"Probably out smooching with ol' Razzle-dazzle Radford," Mike muttered, not bothering to look up from his book.

"I was not smooching," Susan said, stung. Her temper had been sharpened by the astonishing fact that Jeff Laurence had not once tried to kiss her. "As a matter of fact, I had dinner with your paragon of all virtues—Professor Laurence."

Mike looked up then. So did her father, in time to exchange glances with his wife.

"What happened to Brick?" her father asked.

"Not a thing," Susan replied, suddenly wishing she could confide in them without making further complications. But she said, "We figured a little variety wouldn't hurt either of us."

"Something smells," Mike said, when she turned away. "I thought Professor Laurence was smarter than that."

Susan cast him a sisterly glance of contempt and said, "Brat!"

Friday dragged and Susan wasn't busy enough to keep from thinking. Brick paid her a brief visit and made disturbingly cryptic comments. The Professor didn't come in at all and at four-thirty Susan locked her desk, caught a bus and at Wally's Shop downtown she bought an exquisite black lace evening dress for the dance the following night.

AT HOME, SHE tried to figure out how many evening dresses she'd had during her college life. She couldn't recall. College fun, she thought cynically, as she hung the rustling lace folds in her closet. O'Ryan could have it! The same old dance bands, same old ballrooms—even the boys in whose arms Susan

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floated had begun to have a sameness that appalled her.

Saturday evening, when she answered the door at Theresa O'Ryan's timid knock, Susan was still depressed.

O'Ryan carried a shabby little overnight case and her face was ecstatic. Oh Lord, thought Susan, please let everything turn out all right for her tonight.

"I—I'm so excited," O'Ryan said breathlessly, as Susan took her coat and hung it up.

"You're going to be a sensation," Susan told her firmly and began gathering up her make-up.

While painting the lovely new mouth on O'Ryan, she tried to think of Brick. All at once his face blurred into a counterpart of all the other young faces over the last four and a half years. Her fingers trembled. She erased the crooked line with a tissue and started over.

Finally she said, "You're all set, O'Ryan."

"Ohhh!" The girl twirled in front of the mirror, entranced. The effect was all that could be desired. Susan's bronze net evening dress set off O'Ryan's blonde beauty to perfection.

Susan surveyed her own reflection with a sort of distaste. Her shoulders rose whitely from a strapless, close-fitted bodice of black lace. A tiny rhinestone choker emphasized the slender loveliness of her throat. But something was missing, some intangible necessity. She didn't glow like O'Ryan.

Her flaring skirt spun outward as Elizabeth Rollison called, "Susan—Jeff's here."

She caught up her tiny, black satin evening purse, flung her gray squirrel coat over her bare shoulders and said, "O'Ryan, you know I have to be there early for my last minute duties. Jeff and I will see you and Brick at the dance."

Brick had better be nice to her, thought Susan grimly. As far as O'Ryan knew, Brick was her date for the entire evening. The only actual lie Susan had told in this whole, miserable mix-up had come when she informed O'Ryan that Brick thought her cute and wanted to take her to the Tau Phi.

She looked down the hall into the gravely admiring eyes of Jeff Laurence.

"Hi, heartbreaker." Flippancy hid her shyness. "Have you met the folks?"

Jeff murmured something about Mike junior being an "A" student and Elizabeth and Mike senior spoke up simultaneously, saying they had heard so much about the professor they felt like old friends.

In a moment more they were settled comfortably in the warm darkness of his car.

"Could I really break your heart?" His question carried an odd mixture of amusement and desire.

"If you could, would you?" she parried.

Without turning, he reached for and caught her hand. "No, Susan. Not your heart. It's much too gay and kind to be broken."

"Is that the only reason?"

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He laughed. "What a brazen little rascal you are! Want me to commit myself?"

IT SHOCKED HER to realize that she had been instinctively leading him up to a declaration of his feeling for her. She was grateful to the darkness that hid her flush. It had faded completely by the time they made their way up the carpeted stairway to the ballroom in the Athletic Club.

It took Susan some time to check with the caterer on arrangement of the buffet table. Then she had to see the florist about placement of the flowers, and the dance was well under way before she could look for Jeff Laurence.

She found him near the orchestra, surrounded by a group of students and one, a flame-topped, voluptuous girl, was saying tensely, "Professor Laurence, do you feel that the stars have any direct effect on people born under certain ones?"

"Only on clear nights, in the spring." Over the red-head, he grinned at Susan.

The girl laughed throatily, "Why, Professor." Susan was amazed at the sudden fury twisting inside her when she realized the girl was angling for a dance.

It was wonderful when he pushed through the little group to take Susan in his arms and circle out on the polished floor. Rex Richardson had taken up his famous trombone and a Gershwin oldie, *Embraceable You* poured out, sweet and smooth as honey.

"Thought you were never coming back, Susan."

She moved a little so they were closer together as they danced. She could feel his lips moving against her hair.

"You wouldn't have had to ask me for a date, you know," he was saying, "if you had smiled at me that time in the elevator—or if you had smiled just once when I came past your desk."

Again she had the fleeting sense of a secret he hesitated to share. It was tantalizing.

"I thought you never noticed me, Jeff."

He chuckled. "As if anyone could fail to notice you."

Everything was perfect, thought Susan dreamily—the time, the place and the music. The passage of time became inconsequential and she floated in a private world of dreams.

Sudden reality loomed over Theresa O'Ryan's shoulder, as Susan looked into Brick Radford's glowering face. About four feet of floorspace separated them.

"Oh!" She gulped. She had completely forgotten Brick and O'Ryan.

"What is it?" Jeff looked down at her.

"Nothing. I—I just wondered where you learned to dance so well."

"Took thousands of lessons, of course." He chuckled, drawing her closer.

Around the edge of his shoulder she could see Brick and his eyes raged at her. They touched Jeff Laurence like chain-lightning and his mouth

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had a surly twist. Brick was trouble, hunting for a place to begin.

Beyond Brick, Susan saw Digby Purcell at the buffet table with a couple of other stags. He was gloomily munching shrimp impaled on long multi-colored toothpicks and he eyed Brick and O'Ryan with dour interest. He probably had a white mouse in each pocket, Susan thought. Poor Dig. He should learn that white mice and women did not mix.

While she watched, he turned and sauntered aimlessly toward the end of the ballroom and vanished through the dark doorway to the solarium. Susan wished vehemently that she could walk out of her problem as easily.

In the circling crowd she had lost sight of Brick. Jeff seemed to be directing their steps deliberately toward the end of the room. She was still glancing frantically for O'Ryan and her unhappy partner, when Jeff spun her through the doorway and into the dark solarium.

A VAST CURVED sheet of glass formed an oval end to the room and revealed the windswept night sky, crowned by a brilliant moon. He drew her down on the leather-cushioned windowseat beneath the glassed wall.

"This, I like," he said softly. Moonlight traced the edge of his black hair and the lean line of cheek and chin.

This was awful, Susan thought, awful because she liked it too. And it wasn't fair to Brick or O'Ryan. O'Ryan! She had better try again.

"I—I know a girl, a lovely girl who thinks you're wonderful, Jeff." She hesitated, for he had leaned over her, elbow against the wide sill and was tracing the bare curve of her shoulder with a fingertip. It was distracting.

"You do?" His smile was slow and even and his black eyes gleamed.

"Yes. I do. And she's very anxious to . . ." She paused as he brought her hand up to his lips.

He opened her fingers outward like petals on a flower and put his lips warmly against her palm. Her knees were fluid, a condition which seemed to extend to her brain.

"Really, Jeff," she said in a smothered little voice. His arm left the windowsill and circled her shoulders.

A languor enveloped her and she sank against him, tipping her face up to meet his lips. But before he could kiss her, beyond his dark head, she saw a figure.

"Oh, look," she said weakly. "O'Ryan." And it was indeed, O'Ryan, looking scared and unhappy behind a belligerent and scowling Brick.

Jeff didn't turn. He pulled her nearer and muttered indistinctly, "Ummm. Orion. One of the loveliest of the heavenly bodies."

Susan asked feebly, "How can you tell without looking?"

"Look here, Professor Laurence," Brick burst out, "there are a couple of things that are going to get straightened out right now.

Jeff turned then and Susan slipped from his arms. They rose to their feet.

"Susan's got a soft heart and

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wouldn't tell you, but it's time you know." Brick yanked the tremulous O'Ryan forward. "This is your date, the one Susan was trying to make for you when you jumped to the conclusion she was making it for herself."

Theresa batted her eyelashes rapidly and tried to smile. It was pitiful and comical all at once and Susan felt sharp guilt at having coached her in such an effectation.

"Susan is my girl." Brick's jaw protruded. "She should have told you in the beginning."

"That right, Susan?" Jeff's eyes were inscrutable.

"Oh, Jeff—it wasn't really—I didn't mean . . ."

"Susan, for gosh sake," Brick said impatiently, "tell the guy the truth and get it over with. Prof, she doctored this little tomato all up and just for you." He pushed Theresa toward Jeff. "New hair-do, curled eyelashes —all the trimmings." He laughed and Susan winced.

Suddenly Theresa O'Ryan abandoned her pathetic effort at charm. She flung off his big hand. "Professor Laurence, I didn't know a thing about this part of it until ten minutes ago," she cried wildly. "Oh, Susan, why didn't you—I'm so sorry it turned out this way." She whirled on Brick, "And you're mean, Brick Radford. You've been horrible to me all evening and I hate you for what you've done now."

"Cheers for you, Miss O'Ryan," a voice said from the shadows. Digby Purcell stepped into the moonlit square with the other four. "Now may I take you out of here?"

FOR AN INSTANT Theresa's impassioned face held disbelief, fading into astonished recognition and at last gratefulness, as she said, "You certainly may, Mr. Purcell."

"Can you beat that?" Brick remarked, observing their dignified departure. "Just as we were getting the wires uncrossed."

"Brick," Susan said low-voiced, "you were cruel."

Jeff murmured, "I feel a little bruised myself." His black eyes held familiar adult irony as he added, "Forgive me, S. Rollison, if I don't choose to let you direct my social activities. Right now I much prefer the observatory to this dance."

He strode across the room and out the door Theresa and Digby had taken. Susan fought down a desire to run after him. Something that had been lovely was splintered. She looked down, almost expecting to see it in shambles at her feet.

"Now it's fixed," Brick caught her hand cheerfully. "Charge it off to experience, Suse baby."

Susan gave him a bleak look as he led her back to the milling dancers. This was what she got for meddling. She had meddled with other's lives and made a mess of it, a very sticky sensation.

As Brick's arms closed about her, so did the dusty, useless feeling. It dried her throat and stung her eyes. Then, like a landscape lit by a flash of lightning, it dawned on her.

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She had outgrown her environment. She was tired of this. Four years was enough of college dances. Five was too much.

"Brick, let's go."

"What's got into you, Suse?"

She spoke wearily, "I've grown up, I guess. At last."

"Sure." He grinned. "You're a big girl and I like it that way."

"You don't know what I mean. I've got a lot of apologies to make and but fast. You're really boring me."

Susan smiled. "Brick, you once remarked to me that girls were a dime a dozen." She opened her little black satin purse. "Here's a nickel. Get yourself six new ones. Here's your Tau Phi pin, too."

Brick gaped. "Hey!" he cried when she opened the door for herself and stepped out in the March night.

"Good-by, Brick."

The furious roar of the convertible

Mirror, Mirror On The Wall . . .

It's been said innumerable times that it takes two to fall in love, but there's one famous exception to that rule: the sad Narcissus of mythological fame. Narcissus was a handsome boy who angered a goddess and suffered a strange punishment because of it. One day, after hunting in the woods, he became very thirsty and knelt beside a stream for a drink. He was startled when he saw looking up at him from the pebbly depths a face of a water nymph so beautiful that he immediately fell in love with her. Enchanted by the lovely apparition before him, he reached down to touch her and she disappeared as soon as his hands touched the water. Thinking that he had frightened the water nymph, he moved a short distance away and breathlessly waited for her to return. He soon tiptoed back to the stream and cautiously peeping down saw her again. Quietly he bent further toward the pool and, reassured by his gentle glances, the nymph's whole head appeared. The boy began to speak to her and saw her lips move as if she were answering, but he couldn't hear a word she said. At last, encouraged by her loving glances, he once again reached for her, and again, she vanished. This happened over and over again. Gradually the poor boy noticed that her sensitive face reflected all of his emotions and grew as pale and wan as his—like him, she seemed to be a victim of love and despair. Narcissus lingered at the pool day and night without eating or drinking and finally died never knowing that the charming nymph was merely his own reflection gazing up from the waters.

I'm going to start at the beginning, with Jeff. Take me to the observatory, Brick."

In the car his movements were explosive. The tires squealed indignantly as he rounded corners.

His voice was ugly as he skidded to a stop at the foot of Cavu Hill, "I hope you get over this little tantrum, sounded behind her. She did not look back, but started up the hill.

Her heels clicked up the granite steps and into the big quietness of the building. The light was dim at the end of the long hall as before.

She stopped before the long table where Jeff sat. He had taken off his coat and tie and his shirt was un-

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buttoned at the strong column of his throat.

"I've come to apologize, Jeff," she said clearly, "for the misunderstanding and embarrassment I've caused." His gaze was penetrating and her breath shortened. "You mentioned once that I was still growing up. Well, I finished the job tonight and I think it's time I graduated from college life."

"Sounds like you've been doing some highpowered self-analysis," he said dryly.

"I have. When it gets so I can't tell the difference between being Director of Social Activities and acting as Miss Fixit for romance, it's time I quit. I'm resigning Monday and when I see O'Ryan, I'll apologize to her."

"You needn't." Jeff's lips quirked as if restraining laughter. "I just drove O'Ryan and Mr. Purcell to her home, where she promised to show him her prize specimens. It appears her secret passion is raising white mice. I got the impression that she and Purcell are soul-mates and their gratitude to you for bringing them together, even inadvertently, is boundless."

Susan would have laughed had her unhappiness been less acute. Theresa and Digby! They had belonged together and Susan had been unable to see it simply because Theresa was the channel for Susan's own subconscious desire—Jeff Laurence.

She lifted her chin. "I'm glad something good has come of this mixup. And in case your ego was damaged, my final confession should repair it. I didn't know it until tonight, but Theresa was just an excuse. I must have wanted you for myself the first time I ever saw you."

She turned quickly so he would not see the shamed tears that stung her lids. She said, "That ought to clear up the last foggy point. Good-by."

Her heels rang out again, little cymbals of retreat. In another moment she had pushed open the heavy glass door and stood gulping down sobs under the starry, windswept sky.

Before she could take another step, Jeff caught up with her. He took her shoulders and pulled her back against him. His cheek was rough against hers.

"Wait, Susan darling. I've got a confession too. I've loved you ever since your impudent feather bedeviled me into sneezing. And I knew a girl like you would never have to come up here and ask for a date for herself. I tricked you." His voice was husky and he turned her slowly around to face him. "I trapped you—with your soft heart. It was much too good an opportunity. I thought if I could make you aware of me as a man and not a stodgy professor. . ."

"So this is your secret . . ." Her words were cut short as his mouth covered hers.

It was a long, lovely kiss and when the Professor of Astronomy lifted his head, he remarked, "It must be true. I can feel it. The Universe *is* expanding."

"All over the place," Susan agreed happily. ♥ ♥ ♥

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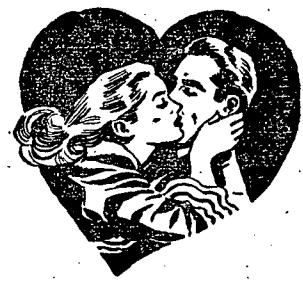

Runaway Closer

by Jeanne Bender

With love at first sight, it's sometimes better not to take a second look.

THE TROUBLE WAS, she had never been a burglar before. The locked house had her stopped, and that was that.

Marty went back up the front walk, sat down on the nearest, largest box of baby equipment, and mentally cursed Pete Stevens, the brother-in-law she had never met.

A few hours ago, in the hospital, her sister Lois had sighed ruefully and said, "Marty, honey, you're an angel to come. I never needed you more. The house we've rented is a complete chaos and practically nothing has been bought for the baby because Pete is really unstrung. The arrival of Junior has put him in a fog."

So here she was—Good Samaritan Marty Gordon, with the hundred and fifty dollars worth of baby paraphernalia she had bought in town and no place to put it. Wasn't that just like a man—to be off somewhere, doing Lord knows what, when he was needed here! And locking her out! After Lois had told him she was coming.

She shook her short bronze curls and scowled at the gray Cape Cod home that her sister and brother-in-law had rented for a year. She gazed speculatively at the upper floor and the flimsy little trellis that reached almost to the roof—and instantly went into action.

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Ten minutes and several skipped breaths later, she was grateful that her one hundred and four pounds had not strained the trellis quite to the breaking point. An overlooked attic window had required almost the agility of a trapeze artist to reach and squeeze through, but apart from a run in her stockings she had negotiated it successfully. A trap door stairway led to a maple and chintz bedroom that amazed her by its neatness; a pine-paneled living-room downstairs was a further surprise: bright Indian rugs free of dust, maple and pine furniture which might have been waxed ten minutes ago.

But according to Lois, the house was supposed to be a grimy mess—a result of Pete's using the fireplace with the damper closed. That occurred after he had wrecked the heating system by forgetting to put enough water in the boiler downstairs. Oh, her brother-in-law was a very charming fellow who could build magnificent highways in Alaska—he had taken Lois there as a new bride a little more than a year ago—but was a bull in a china shop when it came to domesticity.

Well, Marty thought as she looked about, mine not to wonder how he had worked these miracles in his three days of new fatherhood. Hers was to work miracles in setting up a nursery. And in getting dinner, too. She felt a little less annoyed at Pete, now, after seeing how he had cleaned up the place. He must have pulled himself together quickly.

She got the boxes and bundles inside. A small, book-lined den off the living-room would require only a few changes to become a perfect nursery. Marty slid out of her smart, green traveling suit and rummaged through her suitcase for blue jeans and a T-shirt. She was zipping up the jeans when she felt a pressure in the back pocket.

It was the picture—Tod's picture—that she had shoved in the suitcase at the last moment, and some of her enthusiasm slipped away from her.

"Darn it!" she said aloud. "I wasn't going to think about you until next week!"

THE BLOND YOUNG man in the portrait defied any girl to wait until next week to think about him, and Marty felt the old familiar emotions attacking her. Did she, or did she not, want to become Mrs. Todhunter Loring, of New York, San Francisco, and San Antonio, where Tod's were the leading advertising agencies?

If not, why not? Every girl in the New York agency, where Marty was a copywriter, openly envied Tod's interest in her. But, even in the midst of their gayest evenings, in the most romantic night spots, she found herself remote and withdrawn.

"What do you want, woman?" Tod had asked her. "Egg in your beer? Diamonds on your minks?" Tod could, and undoubtedly would, supply anything and everything a girl could ask for. So what *did* she want?

She didn't know. She knew only that she needed time to think. So she was stalling, using the fact of her new

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nephew as a refuge, as well as a duty . . .

Two hours later, Marty stood in the doorway of the former den and contemplated the newly blue and white room with complete approval. It was perfect—a charming, adorable nursery. The bassinet stood in a corner, away from drafts; the desk, covered with white plastic sheeting, held baby scales and an electric bottle-sterilizer. She had placed a low rocking chair for Lois by the picture window, now garlanded with frothy white organdy curtains from an upstairs bedroom.

She was bundling up the original plaid drapes and studio couch cover when she heard the key in the front door. Pete!

"Hi!" she called out, and hurried into the hall.

He was tall and tanned, as she'd expected, with crisp curling black hair. Complete amazement stirred in his deep blue eyes.

Marty realized her rumpled, barefooted appearance must be a cause for wonderment. "Hi," she said again. "I'm Martha. You know—Marty."

She tilted her face for his brotherly peck on the cheek but nothing like that happened. Instead his arms pulled her crushingly close and his lips firmly met her own. While she struggled to free herself from the outrageous kiss, the arms about her tightened, the lips became more demanding. And then, suddenly, she was unable to think at all as the pounding in her ears grew louder and louder and her whole being was filled with a flaming warmth.

When he released her, she was horrified to find her fingers tangled in his crisp dark curls, her other arm about his waist. Scarlet with shame, she pulled away. No other man's kiss had ever before brought such an unbidden response from Marty. And this man was her brother-in-law!

With as much control as she could summon, Marty said, "I'm leaving, the minute I can get a trained-nurse for you!"

"Honey," he drawled, "I think you're the one who needs a trained nurse!" He stared into the nursery behind her. "Holy smoke! What's going on here?"

He's crazy, Marty thought. Lois said he was unstrung, she reminded herself.

"Pete," she quavered. "Take it easy!"

"My name," he bellowed, "is not Pete. It's Michael Reynolds. Just what in blazes have you been doing to my house?"

MARTY STARED IN open-mouthed amazement at the outraged young man who was suddenly not her brother-in-law at all. "Pardon me while I faint," Marty said, her face scarlet.

Lois had told her there were only three houses on Windy Point and that theirs was the green one with the gray shutters. So Marty had climbed into the gray one with the green shutters and proceeded to get everything royally fouled up. Proving, she decided unhappily, that everyone was right about her when they said she always

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leaped before she looked. This was her worst "leap" to date.

"Don't apologize to me," Mike told her gaily. "I think it's fine—finding a beautiful red-head in my house, waiting to be kissed! Except for your mistake, I might never have met you!"

She felt her cheeks growing hot; then, for a second time, she allowed herself to be in a stranger's arms—only this time there was no strangeness. She knew suddenly that she belonged in the arms of this man whose now gentle lips filled her with such excitement.

"You didn't come to the wrong house, angel," he whispered. "My house is the only one for you!"

In her heart, she agreed, for now she knew why she hadn't been able to marry Tod. I've been waiting for this, Marty thought.

"We'd better find the real Pete." She grinned. "Before he calls the police to find me!"

On the way, Mike explained that he owned all of Windy Point, the small rocky peninsula that had been his family's for generations. The house on the tip of the promontory that he had leased to Pete and Lois originally had been his great-grandfather's boat-house.

"It's built right out over the water," he said. "Nobody's ever before spent the entire winter there. I thought your sister and her husband would just be using it for week-ends, after the summer. Of course, there's an old but pretty efficient furnace."

Efficient no more, Marty thought, recalling Pete's ineptitudes.

"Wait until you see the gal who used to be the love of my life," Mike teased. "*The Porpoise II*—a 32-foot cruiser I built last summer. You'd better like sailing and boats, darling. Designing them's my business."

Marty's previous boating experience had been confined to Central Park Lake, but she smiled with enthusiasm. For you, she thought, I'd learn to love boa constrictors.

By now, the road was a mere rocky path, and it appalled her to think of Lois wheeling a baby carriage to and from the former boat-house here on the Point.

The door was open. They stepped into a living-room where once-bright hooked rugs, rustic furniture, floor, walls and ceiling were now begrimed by smoke and soot.

"Ye gods!" Mike exclaimed. "Who threw the bomb!" They made their way into a kitchen littered with unwashed dishes. "Pete! Pete Stevens!" Mike bellowed.

"Hello!" A soot-blackened figure appeared in an open doorway. He waved a wrench at Mike. "Hi, Reynolds. Glad you came. Something seems to be wrong with the furnace." His eyes traveled to Marty. "You're not . . ."

"Marty," she nodded, wanting both to laugh at her brother-in-law's black-faced minstrel man appearance and cry at the wreck he had made of the place.

MIKE MADE A quick trip to the utility room and returned shaking his head. "Hopeless," he told Pete.

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"Completely shot. You'll need a new furnace. I'll get in touch with the plumber right away, but it will probably take at least a week."

But what will we ever do, Marty thought frantically. Lois can't bring a new baby into this!

"Mike," she asked impulsively, "why can't we move in with you till this place is fixed up? Since there's plenty of room and—and the nursery is all ready." She did not add, And it would be wonderful, being with you twenty-four hours a day.

"Why not?" he said finally. While Pete watched in surprise, he drew her close. "It might be good experience at that, for a guy who's just acquired a sudden interest in raising a family!"

Marty threw her arms around his neck. "Darling, thanks. When Lois told me this afternoon what a wreck this house was, I didn't know what we'd do."

Mike regarded her strangely for a long moment. "I don't get it. You knew the shape this place was in—yet you mistook my house for this . . ."

"What goes on here?" Pete asked.

Quickly, Marty plunged into explanations. As she reconstructed her afternoon's adventure in housebreaking, she was relieved to see Mike lose that skeptical expression.

After that, the evening sped. Pete, his troubles erased by Mike's invitation, proved to be the kind of friendly, humorous brother-in-law she would have chosen. After sandwiches and coffee, Mike walked her back to his house and his goodnight kiss beneath the stars left her breathlessly happy.

"Breakfast at ten, darling," he told her. "Aboard the *Porpoise*."

Then he was gone, his broad-shouldered figure swinging back up the road to Pete's where he would spend the night.

The bell that awoke her came from the water. Pulling on her bathrobe, she ran to the living-room window and saw Mike, standing on his wharf, gaily swinging an old-fashioned brass dinner gong.

She hurried to the door. "Hi! Come on in."

"Breakfast's ready," he told her after he had claimed the kiss that Marty thought gave the day a perfect beginning. "Out there." Mike gestured to a sleek, black sailing cruiser tied to the dock. "I'll just dash upstairs and get some rain gear for us, in case the weather acts up."

Marty hurried back into the nursery for her dungarees and sweatshirt.

"Sea legs get with me!" she crooned. And please, Mike, d a r l i n g, her thoughts ran, be as understanding as I think you are if land lubber Marty Gordon gets seasick.

The phone on the desk rang and she reached for it automatically. "Hello?"

"Marty? Is that you, darling? Your brother-in-law told me to call this number."

"Tod!" she answered weakly. The phone clicked as if the connection were broken. "Tod?" she repeated, trying to readjust her senses to a forgotten existence.

"New York's a lonely town without you, my Martykins. When are you

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coming back to me, darling? I miss you so."

How can I tell you that I'm never coming back, Marty wondered.

"Soon," she said nervously.

"You'd better. I'm going nuts without you and it's only been two days." His voice became more serious. "How about that wedding, angel? Wait until you see your ring. A diamond and emerald band to match your . . ." He broke off, swearing at a loud crash in their ears. "Hang on, Marty, I'll get the operator to give us a better line."

"No, don't," she pleaded, deciding it would be more strategic not to argue about the ring, and wanting to end the deceitful conversation as quickly as possible. "I—I've got to go, now. Things aren't quite straightened out up here, yet."

FROM BEHIND HER, Mike said sarcastically, "They are as far as I'm concerned." He looked at her contemptuously. "Diamonds and emeralds hardly go with that outfit 'My Martykins.' You'd better change your clothes and start packing."

"Mike," she pleaded. "You don't understand!"

"No? Maybe I didn't stay on the upstairs phone long enough." His mouth twisted bitterly. "It's a habit of mine, answering my own telephone, although I don't usually cut in on such enlightening conversations."

Marty laid a pleading hand on his arm. "It's not the way you think."

He studied her calmly. "Red-gold hair, sea-blue eyes, and a mouth that's always ready to kiss its way out of trouble." He gestured toward the phone that emitted faint shouts and whistles. "Your boyfriend sounds as if he's blowing a gasket. You were just planning your wedding, remember?"

"Oh, Mike, darling, please . . ." she began.

He slammed the door in her face.

From the living-room window she watched him stride down to the waterfront, kick open the door and enter a small shack on the dock. He'll come back. He's got to. And when he does, I'll make him understand.

Oh, why had Tod telephoned when he did? And if only, only she'd been brave enough to tell him she was never coming back to New York because she was in love—in love with a man who now hated her.

A mouth that's always ready to kiss its way out of trouble, he had said. That meant he believed that her yielding kisses, all her actions, had been deliberate come-ons designed to engineer their stay in his house. Well, why shouldn't he think such terrible things? It must have seemed to him that she was planning to marry Tod all along.

Through a mist of tears she saw Mike leave the shack with a fishing pole over his shoulder. He climbed down into the rowboat tied to the stern of the *Porpoise II,* still secured to the dock.

Then the sight of him calmly rowing through the choppy water infuriated her. The way he pulled at the oars—he was so strong, so sure of himself.

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The hard-headed New Englander, she thought. About two-hundred yards away he drew the rowboat up on the slope of a small rocky island and proceeded to make himself comfortable on a jutting boulder.

At the sight of him so calmly fishing she was struck by sudden desolation. Suppose it hadn't been the real thing with him at all and he was only too glad for an excuse to break off with her? He had never actually asked her to marry him and perhaps today—the morning after—he regretted making love to a girl who had suddenly appeared in his house from out of nowhere. After all, what had there been? A handful of kisses, a few loving words . . .

The nursery, with its crisp, ruffled bassinet ready for Lois' baby, reminded her that her own heartache was not the main problem of the moment. Perhaps her sister could stay in the hospital until they could ready the other house for the child. She hated to think of her brother-in-law and the way this would hit him. Oh, she had made a sorry mess of things.

THE SIGHT OF the now-dead phone lying on the desk caused her to think of Tod Loring. In a few days now she would be out of a job, too. She couldn't go on working for Tod after telling him she wasn't going to marry him. And marriage to Tod was impossible because yesterday, for a dream's breath of time, her heart had come home.

Marty emptied the closet of all her own clothes, then began dismantling the nursery, rebelling at the idea of a baby in that drafty, old remodeled boat-house. There must be a hotel in that city a few miles away where she could get accommodations if she were careful not to mention there would be a baby in the party.

She was dialing the operator when the explosion seemed to shake the house. Marty dropped the phone as the tremendous, deafening clap of thunder rolled and bowled in from the water. Outside, unbelievably, the sun was still bright, but there was an eerie, violet cast to the sky that she had never seen before. It grew swiftly darker and darker. She retrieved the telephone and held on, in spite of the jagged sword of lightning that split the now purple sky and was followed by a crash of thunder even louder than the first. Frightening, crackling noises issued from the telephone. She switched on the desk lamp and almost immediately it sputtered out. The room filled with the acrid smell of brimstone as the house was jolted by a third, all-encompassing thunderclap.

Marty went cold with terror, remembering Mike out on the island, and remembering too the trees out there that would be drawing this lightning. Had he seen the storm coming up in time? It had all happened so suddenly. She peered anxiously through sheets of rain and made out the dark hulk of the island, its trees bent double before the screaming wind. Lightning forking into the Sound briefly illuminated the angry, white-capped waters and clearly lit up the small rowboat hurtling side-

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ways down the crest of a wave. It was Mike's boat. Empty.

For a horror-filled eternity she pictured him being dragged down forever into the storm-lashed water. Then in another burst of lightning she caught a glimpse of his figure scrambling up the jagged rocks to the peak of the island. Then he was lost from sight and she was filled with a new fear for the lashing waters seemed about to close over the very top of the island.

She remembered newspaper photographs of a recent storm where swollen tides had beaten down and overflowed seawalls, turning roads into rivers so that shore residents had to be evacuated from their homes by boat. If this were that kind of storm, Mike's tiny stronghold would be obliterated by the rising water. And he had no way of reaching shore.

She must get a boat to him. But how? The Police? The Fire Department? They surely had emergency craft. She ran to the telephone. It was dead. The storm must have brought down the lines.

She thought, then, of the *Porpoise II*, that Mike had left tied to the dock. Had the storm washed it away?

The force of the wind almost tore the living-room door from her grasp. She made her way down the treacherous path, bent against the wind and stinging rain. By the time she reached the dock she was soaked to the skin, her thin sweatshirt and dungarees plastered against her. She stood, trembling with cold and fear as she watched the *Porpoise II* pitch drunkenly, alternately straining against its moorings and lifting against the dock. Its tilted, slippery deck was about two feet beneath her, almost completing its inward lunge when she leaped, aiming for the cockpit.

She never knew how she made it! The broadside crash of the cruiser against the dock sent her sprawling, face down in inches of water, and for a moment she lay there, grateful for the flooring beneath her, wondering what to do next.

THERE MUST BE a motor on a sailboat this size. She sloshed her way forward on hands and knees to peer down into the cabin. The only disorder was a pile of water-proof cushions knocked off the bunks into a heap on the floor. A tiny, two-burner stove was hung to remain level in spite of the violent rocking of the *Porpoise II*. A gleaming row of cutlery, above the combination sink and refrigerator, also remained undisturbed.

She located the motor under the rear seat. Experimentally, she pushed a button and there was a sputtering, followed by an obliging, steady roar. Circling a long, flat handle she made out the words, Slow, High, Reverse. She began trying to untie the rope that held the back of the boat to the dock, but the strange looking knot Mike had fashioned refused to budge.

Instead, she sawed it through with one of the knives from the cabin. Then she crawled toward the front of the boat end and flat on her stomach, sliced the line there. The *Porpoise II*,

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released from its moorings, pitched drunkenly as Marty slid backwards to the comparative safety of the cockpit.

She pushed the little handle to Slow and turned the steering wheel seaward. The *Porpoise II* shuddered, then seemed to stand still against the force of the waves that crashed over its bow. She tried the High position, and a few minutes later was rewarded by a lengthening expanse of water between the vessel and the dock.

The wheel handled just like the steering wheel of a car. Marty pointed the craft at the island and, with all her strength, hung on, praying that the waves crashing over the bow wouldn't send the boat under.

Mike saw her when she was about fifty feet from the island. He had been sheltered in a long lean-to on the peak of the island which, she now realized, was in no danger of being covered by water. As she came opposite he ran out, waving wildly. She returned the salute, reassuringly. The gesture cost her the control of the wheel that spun out of her other hand, toppling her sidewards. By the time she regained control, she was only about twenty feet from shore and Mike was on the beach, shouting into the wind, motioning her away.

Trying to hear him, she turned off the engine. Mike was pointing, now, to the jagged, black rocks that enclosed the beach and suddenly she understood. She couldn't land. The *Porpoise* would be dashed against the rocks. Caught sideways in the trough of the waves, the vessel tipped dangerously as she tried to get the engine going again. The motor coughed, sputtered, then remained stubbornly silent as she desperately pulled and yanked at every gadget.

She looked up fearfully at the waves breaking against the rocks, ominously close now, and saw that Mike was already in the breakers, swimming out to her. Each time he disappeared beneath the towering waves, she was paralyzed with fear, convinced that he was drowned. Then he'd reappear, breathing deeply, and her heart would start beating again. He was only about ten feet away now and, on sudden inspiration, she opened one of the seat lockers and pulled out a coil of rope she had seen while hunting for the engine. She leaned over the side and threw it with all her strength. It uncoiled in the air, struck Mike on the head, snaked through the water and sank.

SHE HAD NEGLECTED to tie one end to the boat. Humiliated, she pulled out another neatly coiled line but by the time she had secured it to a cleat on the deck, Mike had reached the *Porpoise* and pulled himself onto the deck. Then he was towering over her, streaming water, and the look of fury he sent her stilled the cry of gladness in her throat.

He bent over the engine and began wiping parts with an oily rag. It was only when the motor was again purring that he turned toward her.

"You little nincompoop! What kind of stunt were you trying to pull this time? You damn near wrecked the *Porpoise!*"

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Stunned, Marty could only stare at him. Of all the ungrateful louts. She felt the fury rising, threatening to choke her.

"I suppose I should have let you swim ashore!" she exploded. "Or waited for the Marines to rescue you or maybe . . ."

"Rescue me?" Mike stared at her in amazement. "You thought you were going to—rescue me?"

"What did you think I was trying to do? Take a cruise for my health?"

He shook his head and the anger in his eyes disappeared completely. "I thought you'd simply taken out the *Porpoise* and been caught by the storm." He stared ahead at the churning shore and said, "It may be impossible to land. We may have to drop anchor and swim for it yet."

"You swim," Marty said. "I don't know how." She began to laugh, the sound building over the noise of the wind and the waves that tore at them. The laughter grew more unrestrained, mixing hysterically with the sobs that racked her. Mike really looked at her then. At the shirt and dungarees plastered to her body; at the disorganized, sodden tangle her hair had become; at the frightening paleness of her drawn face.

"Marty! Marty!"

Dimly, she was aware of his voice, lost somewhere in the wind and rain, and of his tall leanness, waving, fading, swimming away in the darkness; and she realized that it was not Mike who was moving away, but herself, settling into a woolly-thick unconsciousness . . .

She felt the soft warmth of blankets wrapped close, became aware of the good aroma of strong coffee. Marty snuggled deeper into the covers, a child awakening from a nightmare of a storm-tossed boat, of swollen seas reaching out to drown her. Her comfort was disturbed by a voice urgently calling her name.

MARTY! PLEASE, MARTY! Wake up, darling!"

Unwillingly, she struggled to open her eyes. It was Mike's worried face above hers. Mike who pulled her into a sitting position with hot coffee pressed against her lips. She took an obedient sip. They were no longer on the *Porpoise II*. She was in Mike's house, on the studio couch in the nursery.

"Marty, are you all right?"

Her eyelids sought to close against her will. "Fine," she managed.

He got more of the coffee into her this time. "Don't scare me again like that."

"I fainted," Marty said remembering. Then she recalled a lot of other things, too. He'd called her a nincompoop and been furious with her. And right now she shouldn't be here at all. She should be packing up her things and the baby's and getting out—fast—before she made a complete fool of herself and started to bawl her eyes out.

"I'm fine now," she said, struggling to get up. "And I'm—I'm sorry I've been such a nuisance. I—I guess I've made a complete mess of things for everybody."

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"You've made a mess of me!" He restrained her from getting up, wrapped the blankets more snugly about her wet clothes. "I've been like a ship without a compass since I first laid eyes on you, Marty darling. But when I thought you'd just been playing me for a sucker . . ." He shook his head. "I was in enough of a blue mood to go out and sit on that blasted island and never notice the tide carrying away my boat."

He didn't seem to be angry with her any more. He had called her "darling" and there were warm lights in his blue eyes that made her a little breathless. "You mean—you don't still think that I was just playing you for a sucker?"

The funny little twist on Mike's lips became a broad smile. "Honey," he said, "I've decided that with you it's better not to think, but to act. Like this!" His lips found hers in a kiss that melted away all her fears, and assured her more convincingly than mere words that he loved her.

Star-filled minutes later, Mike told her that when he realized she had come out in the storm to rescue him he had known how wrong he had been about her.

"You crazy little fool," he said huskily. "Out in that storm, in a boat you couldn't handle, and not even able to swim!" He held her tighter. "When I think what might have happened to you . . ."

"I like what's happening to me now," Marty murmured blissfully. "But I guess I owe you a few explanations, too."

She started to tell him about Tod and the telephone call, and was silenced with a kiss.

"So we don't ask the guy to our wedding," he said. "Forget him." He looked thoughtfully at the baby equipment that filled the room. "But there's one little guy who'll have to get a special invitation."

"Who?"

Mike smiled. "Pete Jr., *our* nephew."

Marty winked. "You said it—Uncle Mike!" ♥ ♥ ♥

Wish Granted

Most everyone has, at one time or another, an idea of his or her ideal person. Few ever meet this figment of their imagination or even hope to, but one man did—the legendary *Pygmalion*. He was a sculptor who had never particularly liked women and had vowed to be a bachelor. Then he created a statue of a girl so exquisite that he fell in love with her. He brought her the gifts that young girls love—bright shells, little birds, flowers and jewels; he even dressed her in a beautiful gown. At last, his love developed to such depths that he went to the altar of Venus and, offering gifts and burning incense, he begged that his beautiful statue might be allowed to come to life. When Pygmalion returned home he went to his statue and lightly kissed her. Imagine his extreme surprise and joy when he discovered warmth in her lips. Thinking that he might just be imagining it, he took her in his arms and kissed her again and again. The statue returned his embrace; she was alive! Following a brief courtship, she was as smitten by love as he and the happy couple were married.

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by Phyllis Gordon Demarest

Tomorrow Comes Too Soon

. . . when a girl tries to build a future on yesterday's dreams.

STACEY WAS ARRANGING the flowers in the living room when a car-horn honked three times in the driveway. Three honks meant Jonnie, of course. He came into the living room, tall and broad-shouldered and looking altogether too young and careless to be the owner of the *Norchester News*.

She said, almost crossly, "Jonnie, don't you know I've a party on tonight?"

"Yes, I know," Jonnie said. "I read about it in the *News*." He stretched out on the couch, closed his eyes. "That's what I want to talk to you about. The party."

Stacey was just about to scold him for putting his feet up on the gold damask; then she thought better of it.

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It was difficult to be angry with him. He was just that kind of an easy-going person.

So she just said, "You're invited to it, darling."

"Yes, I know." He still kept his eyes closed. "But I can't come, Stacey."

She almost dropped the Ming vase in her hand. "Jonnie!"

"It's a blow, honey. But I can't. That's all."

Stacey carefully set the vase on the grand piano. "Jonnie, you can't do this to me! I don't know how to give a party without you. I need you, to keep things going, keep them lively, to . . ."

"Dance with the Howell twins, and that gosh-awful Van Puyster girl, because you know damn well nobody else will. Sure, Jonnie-on-the-spot, that's me. Well, I don't know how, my beautiful, but you're going to have to get along without me tonight."

Stacey frowned. "Would you mind just giving me the faintest glimmer of a reason why you're walking out on me tonight?"

Jonnie sat up. His thick brown hair was more rumpled than usual, and he made a great business of straightening it. Then he took out cigarettes, lit one, and that seemed to take a long time, too.

Finally he said, "Camilla's back in town."

Stacey sat down with extreme suddenness. There was a feeling inside her as of icy water thrown across her heart.

But she managed to cover up her agitation beautifully, she thought. She said, "Jonnie, you might offer a lady a cigarette."

"Uh-huh," he said, and tossed the pack into her lap.

Stacey thought, lighting the cigarette. It's all right, he isn't looking at me anyway. It doesn't matter if my fingers are shaking.

She said, "When?"

He stared at the ceiling. "This morning."

She tried to tell herself she felt better after a few deep drags on the cigarette. "But I still don't see what that's got to do with your coming here tonight."

"It hasn't much," Jonnie agreed. "Except that Camilla is my sister, and my brotherly instincts won't permit me to leave her entirely alone her first night home."

STACEY LOOKED AT her cigarette tip. "Is she living with you?"

"Of course not. I'll have you know I maintain a respectable bachelor apartment. She's out at Brooke House. Why not? It's her place, isn't it?"

She felt sudden color in her cheeks. "Did I say it wasn't?"

"No," he said. "But that's why I can't come tonight. I guess I'll take her to the Country Club, or somewhere."

Stacey leaned over. She jammed out her cigarette slowly. She knew what she was going to say, and she couldn't have stopped herself saying it for the life of her.

"No," she said, quite clearly, "you'll

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do nothing of the kind. You'll bring her here, Jonnie."

"Are you crazy?"

"Quite sane," Stacey said, more serenely than she felt.

He stood up. "You can't do that," he said.

"You mean, I can't invite Camilla here? Why not?"

"In the first place, she'll come. Or don't you know Camilla?"

Stacey pretended to think. "About as long as I've known you. That must be all of ten years, isn't it?"

He made an impatient gesture. "In the second place, it's simply not the thing to do."

She sighed. "Jonnie, I really don't know what you're talking about. I want you at my party, and I want Camilla, too."

"Yes, but she and Kym . . ."

Stacey smiled. "Darling, what are you trying to do? Scare me by resurrecting ghosts? That's over. It's so much over that it doesn't even count. And anyway, we've always been friends, haven't we? What are we going to do now, ostracize Camilla? It may take her a while to get back into the swing of things, anyway. She's been gone over four months, hasn't she? We've just got to show her that no matter what happened between her and Kym, we're not going to shut her out."

When Jonnie just stood there, gray eyes searching her calm ones, Stacey reached up, set her hands on his broad shoulders. Her lips brushed his firm cheek lightly. She stepped back, smiled at him again.

"I have to run now. Got to get dressed and beautified. Kym's coming early. Please be early, too, Jonnie, will you? You and Camilla."

She could hear his car driving away as she sped up the stairway.

STACEY CLOSED THE door of her room carefully. She walked to her vanity mirror, peered at herself in it. Just a second, she shivered. That was because her face looked so utterly pale. She took off the brilliant yellow bandana, shook loose the shoulder-length thickness of her bronze hair. Beneath it wide hazel eyes gazed back at her. Once Kym had said, "There's always a look in your eyes, as if the wind had whipped them bright." But there was something else now in her eyes that was dark, touched with dread, and Stacey knew that it was fear.

She put up her hands over her face, as if to shut out the unnerving sight of that fear. Her heart cried out fiercely, *I won't be afraid! I won't!*

But she flung herself on the great bed, because her knees felt weak, because she was so desperately afraid of Camilla.

Stacey could not remember the time when she had not been a little afraid of Camilla Fenton. There was the very first party she had gone to, from which she had slipped away to come home and cry in a miserable, lost heap on this very bed.

Aunt Harriet had found her there. "Childie, what's the matter? Didn't you have a good time?"

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"Y—yes. I mean, n—no. At least, I was doing all right and then Camilla Fenton came. I didn't stand a chance after that. Aunt Harrie, I'm not so ugly, am I? But when Camilla Fenton walks into a room, I feel as if I am."

Aunt Harriet patted her head. "You mustn't mind that. Camilla's really a very great beauty. Naturally people flock to her. But Jonnie was nice to you, wasn't he?"

"Oh, Jonnie," Stacey said indifferently. "Jonnie's always nice."

And somehow, always around, too. He was around the night she met Kym Carmichael. She and Jonnie were dancing, at the country club when Kym walked in. Stacey just stopped and stared breathlessly.

"Who is he?" she asked Jonnie.

He told her. "His grandmother left him that mausoleum on Brooke Hill. He's been living up there for the last few weeks, trying to write or something." Jonnie added casually, "Of course, I admit he's a collar ad, but do you have to stand there gaping like that?"

Stacey said softly, as if she hadn't heard, "I'd like to meet him."

Jonnie said, "That's easy." He marched her over to where Kym Carmichael was standing, lone and tall at the bar. He said, "I'm Jonnie Fenton. I own the *News*. And this charming creature at my side is Stacey Eaton. She is possessed of the firm and solid conviction that she must meet you, so what can I do?"

Now Stacey saw that Kym Carmichael wasn't just a collar ad. He was something far more virile and romantic than that. Stacey thought of descriptive phrases, but she gave them all up in despair. He was a tall slim stranger with faintly waving black hair, and eyes that were equally as black, and a sensitive mouth. Just someone she never had seen before and who could make her heart stir.

Kym Carmichael shook hands with each of them and said simply:

"I was beginning to think nobody in this town knew I was alive."

SHE DANCED WITH Kym. She couldn't remember what he said to her, because she was in a whirl, so she had to ask Jonnie about him afterward.

"What did you think of him?"

Jonnie grinned. "A knight without armor. But a regular guy."

"Um," Stacey said dreamily. "I've got a date to play golf with him."

"If it's golf he's after," Jonnie said, "you ought to get him. You can putt with your eyes shut." He touched his head in a mock salute. "Happy landings, pal."

Stacey laughed. She laughed for a whole month, golfing, swimming, playing tennis with Kym. And then she cried. She cried whole nights straight in a row.

But her eyes were dry and bright when she faced Jonnie. "Did you have to introduce him to Camilla?"

"I didn't introduce him," Jonnie said. "He just saw her, and you know how it is when fellows see Camilla." He couldn't resist adding, "Even knights without armor, honey child."

Yes, Stacey knew. She had known

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since that first party a long time ago.

She said pathetically, "Jonnie, what's the matter with me?"

"Nothing." He shook his head. "You're a nice kid, and you can queen it on a golf course or a tennis court. But you're just not *femme fatale*."

"And Camilla is?" Jonnie shrugged, said nothing. "I'm sorry. After all, she's your sister." Stacey lifted her ruddy-bronze head. "Jonnie, will you arrange a foursome for tonight?"

He looked at her, eyes narrowed. "You mean, you're going to fight?"

"Why not?" Stacey laughed. "I haven't anything to lose."

There were lots of foursomes after that, but in the end she lost, just the same.

Jonnie said, "Do you want a shoulder to cry on? I've a beautiful one."

"Thanks," Stacey said. Her eyes had a terribly dry look. "But I don't need the shoulder. I'll live through this, too. I'll live through anything that life throws at me, tries to beat me down with."

Jonnie said, "I like a girl with pride. Would you care to go dancing tonight, Miss Eaton?"

"Thanks," Stacey said, and added on a wan smile, "Jonnie-on-the-spot."

That was the day Kym Carmichael eloped with Camilla Fenton.

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IT WAS TWILIGHT outside now, and Stacey stirred on the bed. She ought to be getting dressed, because Kym was coming early. But she went on staying where she was, thinking back to that incredible past.

A nightmare of a time. There she was, a walking ghost, being very gay, because nobody must see, nobody, not even Jonnie, must know that Kym's marriage to Camilla had made her a ghost. It was awful. The effort left her weak and shocked every time Kym and Camilla walked into a place together. In the bleak nights she would rail at herself. She would say, He didn't give you anything. Not even the least bit of hope. He was lonely because he didn't know anybody in town, and he thought you were a friend. But he never even held your hand, he never even kissed you. It's you. You're the one to blame. You threw your heart at his feet, and he didn't even see it.

After a while that kind of reasoning helped. She began to get her perspective back. She began to think, after all I'm young and there's always Jonnie.

And then Camilla Fenton—Camilla Carmichael—went to Reno.

Just like that. Without any warning. One moment everyone thought the young Carmichaels were the most happily married couple in town, and the next moment Camilla went to Reno.

Jonnie didn't know why. He said so. Camilla never had taken him into her confidence. All that Jonnie said was:

"Well, my little chickadee, here's your chance again."

Stacey said nothing. She waited. After two weeks Kym had finally called her.

He said, "Do you want to play golf

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with me tomorrow, or are you afraid to be seen with me?"

"Why should I be afraid to be seen with you?" Stacey asked, over quickening pulses.

"Well, I'm not exactly a divorced man. Not yet, anyway."

Stacey said, "I can't see what that has to do with our playing golf. And besides, I think I can still beat you."

Kym's laugh, warm and rich, came over the wire. "Stacey," he said, "I think that's what I've needed. To play golf with you. No, you're what I've needed."

Her voice was breathless. "I am?"

"You," Kym said. "Sanity and sweetness. Call for you at noon."

THERE WERE LOTS of times with Kym, after that. They weren't all gay. Many of their moments together were serious, penetrating, too.

Kym said, "You remember the man in *The Moon and Sixpence* who suddenly threw up everything, kicked over the traces, to go to the South Sea Islands and paint? Well, after a fashion, I did much the same sort of thing when Brooke House was left to me, Stacey. I had a thriving law practice in New York, but it wasn't what I wanted to make me happy. I wanted to be able to write, express on paper the things I felt and saw in life. I've almost finished my first novel now."

"It will be a wonderful book," she said softly. "I know it."

Kym tipped her chin up between his fingers, and his mouth was whimsical.

"How do you know it, Stacey?"

He was so close she could have reached up, set her own warm red mouth against that whimsical one.

Instead she just said carefully. "If you're fond of a person, you naturally believe in him, don't you?"

"Thank you," Kym said.

And then he leaned down and did the thing she had wanted him to do for so long. He kissed her. When he drew back there was a wondering look on his face, and he laughed unsteadily.

"Stacey," he said, "did you know you are very nice to kiss? Very sweet?"

She didn't answer. She just smiled at him, her smile tremulous, and Kym put his arms around her and held her, and there was suddenly a lovely communion between them, a current strong enough to wash yesterday's defeat from her being.

He said softly, "Stacey, will you marry me?"

The words were wonderful and she should have had wonderful words with which to answer them.

But she could only say, her throat clogged, "Camilla?"

"Camilla and I were divorced last week. They do those things well in Reno. It's legal and finished and forgotten." His dark eyes bored into hers. "Stacey, do you love me?"

"Yes," she whispered, "I love you so very much."

"I thought you did. I love you, too."

He kissed her, and his kisses were warm and gentle as dark rain. Stacey wanted to weep a little under their

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touch. She put her hands on his shoulders and braced herself away from him.

"Kym, are you sure?" Her voice trembled, rushed on. "You see, I've loved you such a very long time. Long, long before Camilla. I don't think I could bear it if anything happened to us again."

Kym took her hands, held them against his heart. "I want you," he said. "I don't know how to tell you any differently that I'm sure."

"But once you were sure about Camilla, too, weren't you?"

He looked at her and he was smiling, a little as one smiles at a persistent child, with patience, indulgence. He leaned down, set his cheek against hers.

"Sweet angel," Kym said. "There isn't any Camilla."

THAT HAD BEEN two months ago. Stacey didn't wear a ring and they weren't engaged openly, because Aunt Harriet had insisted they must observe the proprieties for a time at least.

But Jonnie knew. He guessed, just flicking a careless glance over Stacey's face.

"Ah," he said, "the radiant bride. So you finally made the grade, honey. Or must I salaam and treat you with greater respect from now on?"

"You, Jonnie? That would be too much to expect. And why are you frowning so hard and looking so worried?"

"Sh," Jonnie said, "don't interrupt me. I'm trying to figure out after you're married to Kym just what relation you'll be to me. I mean, if my sister was married to your husband and she divorces him and you marry him and I'm Kym's ex-brother-in-law —oh, hell!" Jonnie ran his fingers through his hair. "You'll have to figure it out for yourself."

Stacey thought now, What am I rehashing and rehashing for? It was just that here in the twilight the past had seemed to catch her up like a net. Her hand went out very resolutely, switched on the bed lamp and, with the light, everything assumed its proper proportions. She got off the bed, began to dress for the evening.

What should it be, the black shoulderless chiffon, or the sea-green? She reached for the black chiffon on its hanger, stopped.

Camilla wore black, very often. It showed off the extreme whiteness of her skin. She was coming tonight. Jonnie had said she would. That was the fear Stacey had been fighting for the past hour.

She leaned against the closet door. "There isn't any Camilla," Kym had said, and she had believed him because there had been the quiet ring of truth in his words. But that had been when Camilla was two thousand miles away in Reno. Now she was here.

Stacey wrenched the black dress from the hanger. She stepped into it, walked to the mirror, stared deliberately, appraisingly. Her own skin looked creamy against black, too. Not as white as Camilla's, because it had that faint golden cast left over from

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the sun. But her hair was rich bronze with a thousand glints. Her eyes were clear hazel, and the lashes were thick and dark. Her mouth was too wide, but it was full and curved, too.

Stacey went down the stairway, her dress swirling like black water about her feet.

Kym was standing at the foot. She walked straight into his arms, smiling, and he held her there.

"You know," he said, "one of the nice things about you is that you're always so understanding. How did you know I wanted you in my arms?"

Stacey said, "You looked lonely."

"I am." He laughed, rueful. "I wish to high heaven we never had let Aunt Harriet talk us into all this being proper business. Stacey, don't you think two months might be considered a decent interval after a divorce?"

Her fingers touched his black hair. "Um, I think so."

His arms tightened around her. "Perhaps," he said hopefully, "if I dance with Aunt Harrie tonight, if I'm very much the dutiful nephew-to-be, I can convince her, too. Perhaps we could even announce our engagement tonight."

"I shouldn't wonder." Suddenly her own arms were around him. "Oh, Kym, I love you so!"

"Sweet," he said, against her hair. "Sweet Stacey."

THE DOORBELL RANG sharply, and Stacey slipped from his arms. "There! That's the party! Shoo, Kym!"

She turned from him to greet her guests and it was while she was shaking hands with the plainer Howell twin that she remembered, and knew a rushing coldness. She had not told Kym about Camilla.

She had meant to, but she had walked into his arms and forgotten everything else. Now people were coming and it was too late to be saying casual things to Kym.

Aunt Harriet came up, all white-haired charm and dignity in rustling taffeta.

"Everything's going beautifully, isn't it?" she whispered.

"Yes," Stacey said. Her eyes darted mechanically over Aunt Harriet's shoulder toward the opening outer door. "Everything's going splendidly."

Camilla wasn't coming. That must be it, because Jonnie was late and it wasn't like Jonnie to be late. Yet she hated the relief pouring through her, despised it.

Aunt Harriet said, "Where's that young man of yours?"

"Jonnie?" Stacey said abstractedly.

Aunt Harriet laughed. "Darling, your dark Adonis! He promised to dance with me." And she went off to look for Kym.

Terry Clemens came over, caught Stacey by the hand. "Come on, Stacey. This music's too good to waste."

It was while she was dancing with Terry that it happened. She looked over toward the archway, and there was Camilla. She was just standing there, etched there, like a lovely portrait, the light from the huge chandelier slanting its brilliant rays down

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on her, catching all her beauty in breath-taking, dramatic focus.

She wasn't wearing black. Her gown and matching wrap were heavy metallic gold. Her hair was as Stacey remembered it—amber mixed with sunlight.

Stacey saw Kym's tall figure over at the far end of the room. His black eyes were riveted toward that picture in the archway.

"Excuse me," Stacey said to Terry Clemens.

She walked across, and under the dusky sway of her dress you couldn't have told that her knees were shaking.

But it was Camilla who spoke first. Camilla, in her warm, lilting voice holding out both hands.

"Stacey, how nice of you to ask me!"

Stacey squeezed the slim hands an instant. "Don't be silly. Where's Jonnie?"

Camilla laughed. "Gone to check his hat or something. I was just wondering where to put my wrap."

"Come on," Stacey said, "I'll show you." They left the room together.

SHE LED THE way up the wide staircase, pushed open a guest-room door. She had to say something.

"You were so late. I almost thought you weren't coming."

"You know me." Camilla was unloosening her wrap before the vanity mirror. "It takes me hours to dress. And there was poor Jonnie, having kittens. He was especially worried about the Howell twins."

Stacey said, "They've been adorning the wall, waiting for the guy."

She watched Camilla. She couldn't help it. Camilla's poise was something to admire.

The blonde girl said, "I always say Jonnie's the nicest brother I ever had. Look how he wangled this invitation for me tonight. Stacey, I should have gone mad spending my first night home in Brooke House."

"He didn't wangle it," Stacey said. "I asked him to bring you."

Camilla turned around. "Did you? Did you really?"

Stacey could see her face now, the long, limpid green eyes, the cameo-perfect features set in the white skin, the delicately carved mouth, tinged to scarlet. And the soft floating halo of sunlit hair.

Stacey said, "We're friends. Why shouldn't I ask you?"

"Because of Kym," Camilla said, very gently.

Stacey stood absolutely motionless. "What about Kym?"

The small gesture was frank. "You needn't try to spare my feelings. I know all about you and Kym. Jonnie told me."

"Did he?" She kept her voice calm.

"I think," Camilla said, "he thought it only fair to tell me. Because he knew if I came here tonight, I would run into Kym. And Jonnie is my brother, you know. Even if we don't always agree on all things, that doesn't necessarily mean we haven't a very sincere affection."

Stacey's hand found the quickening pulse in her throat.

"Well? What are you trying to say?"

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Camilla looked at her. "Are you going to marry Kym?"

"Yes," Stacey said. "I'm going to marry him." Her head lifted very slightly. "We're engaged, if that means anything to you."

Camilla smiled oddly. "It means a great deal to me. You see, I still happen to be in love with him."

Stacey caught her breath swiftly. "You divorced him."

"I know." Camilla had stopped smiling. There was a somberness to her green eyes, a gravity to her mouth. "Perhaps you wouldn't understand about that, so it's useless to explain. But that doesn't mean I'm any the less in love with him."

Stacey's mouth was suddenly reckless. "It doesn't matter to me whether you are or not. You were his wife. You had your chance. Now I want mine! What are you going to do about that, Camilla?"

Camilla stood straight, lovely. Her eyes held a challenge.

She said, "This is your house, Stacey. You can easily order me out of it."

Stacey stared back. And because in that moment the fear in her was more alive than ever, Stacey laughed, deliberately breaking the tension.

"No, Camilla, I won't order you out of my house. You know I won't do that."

She turned and walked with quiet dignity from the room.

ALL THE WAY down the stairs she kept her hand on the bannister, as if she needed support.

Suddenly, Stacey wanted to find Jonnie. She wanted to talk to him. But she didn't find him. She found Kym instead, or rather he found her. A laughing couple passed them and he said:

"Do you know you haven't danced with me yet?"

She went into his arms, but she didn't look at his face, because she didn't know what she might see there.

Yet his voice, when he spoke, was controlled enough. "Did you know she was coming here tonight?"

She didn't pretend. "Camilla? I had an idea. Jonnie told me she got back in town this morning." Stacey paused. "In fact, I even suggested he bring her along tonight. I didn't think you would mind."

"Mind?" His tone changed, sharpened. "No, of course I don't mind. I'd just like to be warned of these things ahead of time, that's all."

She thought, Do you mean you needed to be warned? And still she wouldn't raise her eyes to his dark ones.

She just said, "Well, it seemed silly to stand on ceremony. I knew we were bound to run into her sooner or later, seeing Jonnie as much as we do. And I didn't think it would embarrass you. It isn't as if we had announced our engagement yet."

"It doesn't matter at all," Kym said, and his tone was more edged than ever. "But I do think you might have consulted me first."

Stacey's gaze flew upward then, because Kym never spoke in that sharp, unnerved tone. Then she saw that

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there was a frown between his brows, that his mouth was compressed.

She said slowly, "I'm sorry, Kym. I didn't realize. Of course, you're quite right. I should never have . . ."

A voice said, so soft it seemed to be one with the music, "Hello, Kym."

Stacey didn't turn her head, but Kym did. Stacey was watching his face. Not a muscle of it moved, and yet for all that her slim body, so close to his, seemed to feel a tightening within him.

"Hello, Camilla." There wasn't any indication in his voice that the meeting meant anything to him. "I didn't know you were back."

She was dancing with Jonnie. His voice was the least bit gruff. "Hi, Kym, Stacey."

Camilla said, "I didn't tell anyone I was coming. I'm at Brooke House, of course." Her eyes were abruptly all frankness. "Stacey, I wonder if you'd be a dear and change partners for a moment? The living room ceiling's started to crack again, and I simply must ask Kym what's the best thing to do about it."

Stacey said, "Of course."

And Kym said, "What we should have done a long time ago. Put on a whole new roof, like I told you."

"But Kym, I love the place as it is. It's so darling and ramshackle."

STACEY WAS IN Jonnie's arms now, feeling slightly dazed.

"I always maintain," Jonnie said, "there's nothing like a good roof to keep the rain out." He looked slightly bad tempered.

Stacey stared at him. "What's the matter with you?" she asked. "What's the matter with all of us? Kym and you, even myself. We're all keyed up. We're all ready to snap."

"Uh-huh," Jonnie agreed. "The only one who's in perfect humor, who's her usual charming self, is my dear sister."

She could see Kym and Camilla. Camilla seemed to be talking very earnestly, volubly.

Stacey said, "They make a magnificent looking couple, don't they?"

"A study in black and white beauty," Jonnie said dryly. "I suppose that's why you asked Camilla here. You wanted a last glimpse of them together before you marry Kym."

"Oh, stop it!" Stacey flung at him suddenly.

Jonnie looked at her, surprised. "Now who's snapping?"

She bit down on her lip. "I'm all right. I just want to talk to you."

Jonnie stopped dancing. "Come into the garden," he said.

They went into the garden. The night was crisp with early spring. The stars looked a long way off and silver-cold. Stacey sat down at the edge of the fountain.

"Jonnie," she said, "do you know why Camilla divorced Kym?"

"No," he said, "I don't. I didn't ask, because if she wanted to tell me she would. And if she didn't, the rack wouldn't get it out of her."

Stacey was silent an instant. "I never asked Kym either. I tried to, but he always talked about the past

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burying its dead, that kind of thing. It didn't seem wise to press him." She hesitated, because the next was hard to get out. "Do you know what she told me tonight? She told me that she was still in love with Kym. Do you think that's possible?"

Jonnie said reasoningly, if not comfortingly, "It's possible. You're in love with him yourself, aren't you? It seems to me Kym is the sort of man almost any girl can be in love with."

Stacey trailed her fingers in the pool. "I wish I hadn't asked Camilla here tonight."

"I wish I hadn't let you," Jonnie said candidly.

"If you were a woman," Stacey said miserably, "you would understand why I asked her. Why I had to."

"Well, I admit my womanly instincts have always remained slightly undeveloped. And you're shivering. Let's go back to the house.

"I don't want to go back to the house. Not right away, anyway. That's another thing you wouldn't understand, with your undeveloped instincts."

"You'd be surprised," Jonnie said. "Where can I find you a wrap?"

"I've got a coat in the hall closet. Hurry up, will you?"

HE WENT OFF, striding through the trees. Stacey watched his tall, broad-shouldered figure until it was out of sight. Oh, Jonnie, she thought despairingly, why can I talk to you the way I can't even talk to Kym? But maybe that was one of the oddities about love. It sets up barriers, places hurdles of fear in your path.

She seemed to sit there a very long time. Or maybe it was just that she was restless. Maybe it was just that she couldn't forget the sight of floating amber hair so perilously close to raven-black.

She walked back toward the house and the library windows were open and she thought she would go in the room.

But she didn't go in there. She stood outside, a shadow in the blueness and those two in there didn't even see her.

A study in black and white. Pale wondrous hair shining close to rich ebony. White arms clinging to square-cut shoulders. Scarlet lips, warm, soft, pressed against finely moulded ones.

Stacey stood where she was. In there, the room was warm, alive, with the thing that was going on. Around her, the night was cold, the night was quite dead. She could not feel it at all.

It was Camilla who drew away first. Her head was flung back, and her hair streamed to her slim waist, and under the lamp-glow Stacey could see all the delicate loveliness of her face, the bright triumph of her eyes, the parted sheen of her mouth.

She heard Camilla's voice say softly, "Darling, darling, darling! Kym, it's the same. You don't have to tell me. I felt it! I can see it in your eyes. Kym, all this other thing with Stacey is only rebound. You love me so much you hate me. You want to spite me, hurt me. Haven't we hurt each other enough? Dearest, I'm still yours.

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You're still mine. The courts haven't changed that. Isn't it time we . . ."

"Shut up!" Kym said, and his voice wasn't husky at all. It was taut, it flicked like a whip.

Camilla's hands held his lapels. Her eyes held his. "Darling, listen to me. All these months without you . . ."

Kym put his hands on her shoulders. He shook her. He shook her so hard that even the leaves above Stacey's head seemed to be rustling.

He said, "You she-devil! You damned she-devil. Can't you see I'm happy as I am? Or is that why you came back? Because you knew I was happy? Because you knew I was content—yes, without you—and you couldn't stand it?"

Camilla said, "I love you, Kym."

He stopped shaking her. All at once. He looked at her, and Stacey knew it would happen, even before he caught Camilla close.

Behind her in the darkness someone slipped a coat about her shoulders. Someone tall and close, so that Stacey shut her eyes a second, leaned her head back against a broad chest. It was a second of surcease. It was a moment when she did not have to think, or see.

She felt strong arms beneath her shoulders, her knees. She was being carried, and her eyes were still closed, and it was almost as good as fainting, because she didn't know where she was going and she couldn't feel anything, anyway.

She was being set down quite gently. She heard the roar of a motor in her ears, and the wind rushed to meet her face, stir her heart to face an aching life.

JONNIE DROVE THROUGH the merciful dark, and Stacey sat beside him, straight, white, and perfectly still. Somehow it was less a stillness of motion than the cessation of all things inside her.

When at last she did speak, her voice was low, colorless. "I suppose you saw."

"That's right." He sounded completely matter of fact. "Want to talk about it?"

"No," Stacey said.

"Want to go home?"

She leaned her head back against the seat, closed her eyes. "I don't ever want to go home."

Jonnie kept on driving. After a long time they stopped, and she opened her eyes. Jonnie had stopped outside a roadhouse.

"I'd like a drink," he said.

"I wouldn't. And you're not fooling me, Jonnie."

"No?" he said. He leaned over, swung open the door on her side. "You're all frozen up inside."

She nodded. "I want to stay that way."

Jonnie pulled her firmly from her seat. "What for? It'll only be harder to unfreeze you afterward."

She went with him listlessly. The place was fairly quiet, fairly deserted, too. But passing the bar, Stacey caught a glimpse of her face in a mirror and it startled her.

For all the healthy tinge of gold-tan in her skin, the brilliant laquer-

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red of her wide mouth, she had never seen anything quite so lifeless as her own face.

They slid into a booth opposite each other.

Stacey said, "Not dead with her boots on. Dead with her make-up on."

"What are you talking about?"

She laughed. It was odd but when she laughed it hurt, so that she had to catch her breath sharply.

"Me," she said. "I'm glad I died with my make-up on. I've always had a horror that I might not. And there I'd be in all my naturalness, my unadorned glory—or lack of it."

He said, "You look all right without any make-up. I've seen you."

She followed the pattern of the checkered tablecloth with a fork.

"But not as beautiful as Camilla," she said. "No one could be as beautiful as Camilla."

"Nonsense," he said. "Lots of girls are as beautiful as Camilla."

"I don't care about them," Stacey said. "Kym wasn't married to them."

Jonnie's gray eyes fixed her, stern. "Drink your drink."

"Straight? Don't be silly. I can't."

"Straight," he said. "If you don't I'll come around and make you."

Stacey said, "Consider yourself made a face at." But she picked up the drink and gulped it down. Then she could look at Jonnie and not be afraid the tears in her eyes would show. "Jonnie, I'm not crying. You needn't get scared. I'm not the crying kind of female. It's just the liquor. It stings."

"I know. It does that to me, too." He handed her a neatly folded handkerchief.

Stacey dabbed at her eyes with it. "I think I'll keep it, if you don't mind," she said, and after that she didn't say anything for a long moment.

Jonnie leaned toward her. "Look," he said, "what are you going to do?"

She glanced up then. "Do? I'm going to call Aunt Harriet. She may be worried."

"Don't bother calling her. We're going back."

Back? To music and gayety that wasn't part of her any more? To Kym, who wasn't part of her any more?

She said, "I'd like another drink."

He opened his mouth to say something, closed it again swiftly. He gave the order. This time she sipped the drink carefully.

"Jonnie," she said, "why did she have to come back? Before Kym and I were married, before we were even formally engaged? Was it just fate, inevitable?"

"I don't know, Stacey. I've never been able to figure out yet what's fate, and what's the human equation."

"Maybe it would all have happened, anyway. I mean, Camilla would have got him back after we were married." Her mouth twisted ever so slightly, as the idea took shape. "Yes, I think she would, if she wanted him—if he wanted her. I think I knew that instinctively. That was what made me insist you bring her to the

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house, Jonnie. I had to see them together. I had to find out if there was any foundation to that fear. I couldn't run away from it. Dodging Camilla, pretending she was still two thousand miles away, would have been just that. Well, I found out, didn't I?"

Jonnie was silent. She thought wearily, there wasn't much he could say to whitewash that vivid scene in the library. And it was doubly difficult for him, because Camilla was his sister.

He said, "Do you realize you've walked out on your own party?"

"Yes," Stacey said softly. "What might have been my engagement party, too. Jonnie, do you think I ought to hate Kym, or can I go on loving him?"

His eyes were steady. "I think that's up to you."

"I can't hate him. I keep remembering something Camilla said in the library. She said the thing with me was all rebound. And of course, it was. I don't suppose Kym even realized it himself, and maybe I didn't want to. Maybe it was just pleasanter living inside a tinsel baloon, not trying to prick holes into it." She finished her drink, stood up. "Give me some change, Jonnie. I'm going to call the house."

AUNT HARRIET SOUNDED frantic.

"Stacey, where on earth are you? What's happening?"

"I'm with Jonnie," she said. "And nothing's happening. Nothing can happen to me while I'm with Jonnie. You ought to know that. He's always safe to be with."

"Yes, but where are you? You can't walk out on your own party!"

"I can and I have," Stacey said. "What difference does it make? There are so many people there, they'll never miss me anyway."

"Stacey!" Aunt Harriet wailed. "Kym's missed you. He's already asked me five times where you are."

"Oh," Stacey said thoughtfully. "If he asks you again, just tell him I'm with Jonnie and I'm all right." She paused an instant. "Tell him, Aunt Harriet, that everything is all right. Do you understand? Everything."

"No, I don't understand."

"Kym will," Stacey said. "He'll understand."

She hung up. She stood there in the hot little booth staring blankly at the telephone. The message she had sent Kym was good-by to love, wasn't it? After a few moments the booth seemed stifling, or maybe it was the way her heart clogged up against her throat. She went back to Jonnie. She sat down beside him and smiled.

"Are you doing this because you're sorry for me? Holding my head?"

"I'm not holding your head."

"No," she said. "So far you haven't even held my hand."

"Besides," he said, "I'm not sorry for you. At twenty-two, you can get over anything."

Stacey stopped smiling. She shook her head slowly. "Not everything. Not when the same thing happens to you twice, Jonnie. You can live

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through it the first time because you've enough pride and courage to bolster you up. By the time it happens again, you've worn out a lot of that pride and courage. So you've less resistance."

He frowned. "The first time you said you would fight. And you did."

"This time I'm not even going to make a stab at it. I lost anyway. I'd lose again. Jonnie, I want another drink."

"You're not getting it."

"Yes, I am." She signaled the waiter. "The same, please. Jonnie, don't look so angry with me."

HE SAID, GRIM, "I'm just thinking how angry Aunt Harrie is going to look when I carry you home."

"Oh, that's all right. I told her I was with you. I told her nothing could happen to me."

Stacey's lashes came half together. "You're very nice tonight. You're almost handsome. Especially with your hair tidy for a change."

"If you close your eyes altogether, I could be Robert Taylor."

"You're Jonnie Fenton. You own the *News*, a nice clean paper."

"I'm a nice clean boy."

"Um. Do you know you've never even kissed me?"

Something in his gray gaze was almost hostile. "I certainly don't intend to start here and now."

Stacey sat there looking at Jonnie's mouth. It was the first time she had ever really looked at it. It did not have the fine perfection of Kym's, but it had its good points for all that. It was firm, and yet like her own, on the generous side.

She said, "Didn't you ever want to kiss me?"

"Oh, shut up," he said.

She leaned close. "I want you to kiss me." Her lips were parted, careless. Everything about her was a little devil-may-care, the way a girl would want to seem when she is trying to hide heartbreak.

He looked at her, and his eyes suddenly narrowed.

"Do you?" Jonnie said. "Do you want me to kiss you, Stacey?"

He pulled her close. The lights were dim. The few people in the place weren't bothering with them, anyway. He kissed her. Not very seriously at first, almost teasingly. And then, with a growing intensity, a deepening pressure.

The devil-may-care feeling went out of Stacey. Without warning, it seemed to be swallowed under by something that had the power of flame, the rush of a torrent. She kept thinking, But this isn't happening. Not with Jonnie. Jonnie isn't kissing me like this. He wouldn't—he couldn't. But he could and he was. He was kissing her so that she couldn't seem to catch her breath properly. So that she was drained of all but the feel of his lips, the hard, sinewy strength of his arms around her.

He stopped kissing her. He did it so abruptly that he seemed to push her from him.

He spoke almost roughly. "Okay," he said. "You asked for it."

Stacey just sat there, an incredulous

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look on her face. After a moment, because she could still feel that strange, rushing torrent inside her, she leaned her head against the back of the booth.

"Jonnie," she said, and her voice sounded oddly husky, "I didn't know it would be like that."

THE GRIN HE gave her was sardonic. "You mean, you didn't know I had hidden charms?"

"Um. You know what I was wondering?"

"No. What?"

"I was wondering," Stacey said, "if you would care to marry me."

Jonnie sat very still.

Finally he said, "To what am I indebted for that proposal? To the three-straight Scotches you've had, or my hidden charms?"

Her eyes were on him, thoughtful. "Put it down to anything you like. I think it's a wonderful idea."

"Practically stupendous," he agreed. "Three more Scotches, and you might even mean it."

"I do mean it." All at once, she knew that she did. It was the one thing that had evolved itself clearly out of all of tonight's happenings. "Don't stare at me as if I'm crazy."

He shook his brown head. "Maybe you're not. But your ideas are."

"It isn't a crazy idea." Her eyes were more than thoughtful now. They were deep, serious. "I've known you forever, haven't I? I know what I'd be getting, and so do you. You're a sane, sensible person. In fact, you're perfect. So marrying you would be a sane, sensible thing for me to do."

"I see." He twirled his empty glass carefully. "I'm a sane, sensible person. I'm even perfect. And you've just found it out tonight, because you've lost Kym Carmichael."

"You don't have to drive that in. I'm not even being bitter about losing Kym. I accept it as the inevitable. It was Camilla and it is Camilla. So that's that." She was surprised at her own steadiness. "Just because you happen to fall in love with a man doesn't always mean he's the right man for you, either."

Jonnie went on twirling his glass. "And you think I am?"

"I think," she said, rather solemn, "you're more right for me than Kym. At least you aren't in love with anyone else."

"That's true," Jonnie agreed. "I'm not. But you'll have to think up a better reason than that for my marrying you."

She was silent a long instant. And when she spoke, her voice had lost some of its quietness.

"All right," she said. "How's this? I went through the business of watching Camilla marry Kym, meeting them places afterward. I just can't do it again. Not alone."

"The reason's getting slightly clearer," Jonnie said. "You want a husband for moral support. Is that it?"

SHE HAD TO keep tight hold of herself. "Jonnie, if you keep on probing, I'll break. It's just that I need you, that you're the one person I've always felt I could turn to, lean

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on. You're Jonnie-on-the-spot. If you don't like being married to me, you can always call it quits, can't you?"

He frowned. "I guess so. That's what they have divorce courts for. But that's a hell of a basis for marriage."

Her mouth suddenly trembled. "Go on. Keep on probing. Use the surgeon's scalpel."

He looked at her. "Easy, Stacey."

"I can't help it," she said. "You don't know what it's like, remembering all you went through before, knowing what your friends must be thinking or saying about you." The taut thread of leashed desperation ran through her words. "Jonnie, can't you see that you've got to marry me? Can't you see you owe it to me, that it's the decent thing to do?"

"I owe it to you?"

"You owe it to me." Her hands were tight clenched in her lap. "Camilla's your sister, isn't she?"

Jonnie looked at her searchingly.

Then he said slowly, "You mean, Camilla's my sister and she's broken up your happiness twice. She has taken Kym from you twice. And if I were any kind of a gentleman, I'd see it as my duty to stand by you, help save your face by marrying you."

She closed her eyes. Her hands relaxed, lay weary in her lap. She felt suddenly cold, shivery.

"No," she whispered, "no, Jonnie. That's crazy reasoning, isn't it? You don't really owe me anything. None of this is your fault. You're just a good friend, a fine friend. You can't help it if everything I touch falls to pieces."

"Stacey," he said, "you're crying."

"Yes. I know. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. If you'll just give me your handkerchief, I promise I won't make a scene."

"You've got my handkerchief." All at once his voice was quite gentle. "You've got me, Stacey."

She sat very still. The little shivers inside her stopped. The wet fringes of her lashes parted, opened very slowly.

"Jonnie," she whispered, "do you mean it?"

He took the forgotten handkerchief from her lap. He dabbed at the tears on her cheeks.

"Good thing you don't use mascara," he said. "You'd look like a queer bride."

She stared. "Did you say bride? You mean, now—tonight?"

"Listen," Jonnie said, "we're half way to Riverton, aren't we? That's where everybody around here goes to get married in a hurry. Now look, Stacey, be reasonable. You don't think I'm going to spend all that money on gasoline to come out here twice, do you?"

"Jonnie," she faltered. "Jonnie, I . . ."

She stopped trying to say things. She just took the handkerchief from him, blew her nose very hard.

ONE HOUR LATER Jonnie pulled the car to a standstill. "Look," he said. He pointed. "How about that one?"

Stacey stared at the dignified sign, gold lettered, swinging on the moonlit

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lawn. It read: Marriages Performed.

She said carefully, "It's a very nice sign, Jonnie. And besides, it's the third one we've come to, so it ought to be lucky."

He sat back, as if he wanted to see her face. "How do you feel?"

She thought a moment. "Sort of cosy, warm inside. As if everything were suddenly going to be all right."

His gray eyes met hers. "Sure it isn't that last Scotch?"

"Quite sure." She tried to keep the hammering in her heart out of her voice. "If you're trying to suggest I back down, I'm not going to. I know exactly what I'm doing. I want to do it. And if you back down on me, Jonnie Fenton, I'll never talk to you again as long as I live."

"I'm not backing down." He grinned at her in the dim light. "You know, I can't resist a gamble. Never could." He leaned over, kissed her smooth cheek lightly. "And anyway, you caught me in a marrying mood."

They walked up the gravel pathway, hand in hand. They rang the bell. When the door finally opened, Jonnie still kept tight hold of Stacey's hand. She wasn't frightened. She just thought This is right. I don't know why, but I know it's right. And there was a high, resolute feeling inside her, something that coursed wild and free. It was like a falling away of everything she had ever known in life before. It was like setting your feet on a new road, a clear, unwinding stretch of road ahead. She wanted to tell Jonnie that. She wanted to set her head against his broad shoulder and cry a little, softly, gratefully. Everything finally made sense.

They came out again, and got into the car, rather silently.

She said, "You were awfully sober in there."

"So were you. Very sedate, too. Marriage is a sobering business. How do you feel?"

"Jonnie," she said, "would you mind calling me Mrs. Fenton?"

"All right," he said. "How do you feel, Mrs. Fenton?"

Stacey closed her eyes. "I wanted to hear it. And I don't know how to describe how I feel. Do you know the way you feel when you start out on a cruise? When you start out on a new adventure?"

"You mean, the way I felt when I bought the *News*?"

"Um, something like that." Stacey opened her eyes. The clean cut lines of Jonnie's face were all hazy and blurred in the dimness. "Jonnie, wouldn't you like to kiss your wife?"

He didn't move. "Very much," he said, then. "I'm reserving it for the proper time and place. Stacey, this belongs to you, not me." He stuffed something into her hand.

STACEY LOOKED DOWN at the marriage certificate. When she spoke, it was almost a whisper.

"Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Fenton. Did you think we would ever be that?"

"No." He was starting the car. "It's practically a scoop. I'll put it in the *News* tomorrow."

Stacey leaned her head against his

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shoulder. "Jonnie, let's build a house."

"What kind of a house?"

"Well, one big enough for our children, of course."

The car swerved under Jonnie's hands. He said, "Don't say things like that to me when I'm driving."

The road ahead was white and straight under the moon. She stared at it dreamily.

"Jonnie," she said, "I'm glad I have you. No matter what happens, I'll be glad of that."

"No matter what happens?"

"Yes," Stacey said, and her voice was very little and far away.

There wasn't anything near but the feel of Jonnie's shoulder beneath her bright head, the solid feel, the warmth of it. That, and the strange, certain knowledge of rightness within her. She could feel her eyes closing with a drowsy peace.

"We're home," a voice said.

She opened her eyes, saw the tall building of Jonnie's apartment house. There were a few lights burning, a very few.

"Yes," Stacey said, on a little sigh, "we're home."

Jonnie's hand reached out, turned on a lamp in the darkened apartment. Stacey had been in Jonnie's apartment many times, casually, lightly. But this moment was different from any time she had ever known, and her heart seemed to race with a new tempo.

Jonnie took her black velvet wrap from her, and her bared shoulders quivered ever so slightly.

He said, "I'll light the fire."

"Please." She was cold, from the long drive, from being asleep so long in the car.

She watched him, as he knelt down, struck a match to the tinder in the grate. When the flames blazed, she moved toward them, held out her hands. But the coldness of her body persisted, the stiffness of her limbs.

"Darling," she said, "have you got a drink? I'm frozen."

Jonnie swung around. "A drink?"

She was gazing down at the dancing light on the fire. "Yes. I'm practically numb. You shouldn't have let me sleep so long."

HE DIDN'T SAY anything. He moved to the walled-in bar. And then he was holding out a small tumbler to her, and Stacey took it, and her laugh echoed above the flames.

"Jonnie," she said, "drink with me. Darling, drink to us!"

He got himself a drink. He came back, and they clinked their glasses, and Stacey downed her drink, and shuddered faintly as the burning liquid poured through her. She set her empty glass on the mantle and held out her hands to the flames again, and her voice came, small.

She said, "Jonnie, don't you want to kiss your wife?"

There was a long silence, a very long one, in the flickering light. And then Jonnie's voice saying quietly, deliberately:

"No."

Stacey turned her eyes to him. He was standing there, very tall and straight.

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"No?" Stacey said. "But you wanted to before. You said so."

Jonnie set his glass down, too. He seemed all at once to tower above her.

"That was before. Now it's different. Now you're afraid, Stacey."

She shook her head. "Afraid? I don't understand."

Jonnie said, "You're afraid of the thing you've done."

STACEY STARED. SHE could see his eyes now. They were like steel.

She shook her head again. "Stop looking at me like that. I'm not afraid! I haven't changed. I'm just as sure as I was before." She smiled at him suddenly. "Jonnie, kiss me. You'll see then I haven't changed."

He didn't move. He stood there so still that his stillness frightened her, like a net closing down over all the certainty inside her, stifling it.

He said, "When you asked me to do that in the car, I believed it. I felt you meant it. But now I don't. You had to have a drink before you could ask me to kiss you here, didn't you, Stacey?"

She couldn't stir. A strange bewilderment had dropped its pall upon her.

"But that's crazy!" Her voice seemed to be fighting its way through fog. "I asked you for a drink because I was cold. I told you that!"

"I know," he said. "You were cold inside you—cold with fear."

Her eyes were wide, strained. "I'm not afraid! Jonnie, I swear I'm not!"

He merely stood there, very quiet. "You're not fooling me, Stacey." Most of the steel had gone out of his gaze. Now it was wise, understanding. "You're a good kid and a brave one. But what happened tonight in the library set you off balance, made you lose your sense of values. Your world with Kym slipped out from under you, and you tried to grab at a new one with me. Only it wasn't there."

"Jonnie!" Her hand went out to him, and her throat was suddenly dry, hurting. "You're trying to pull our world apart before we've had a chance to build it!"

He took her outstretched hand, held it in both of his. He must have felt it tremble, for his clasp tightened.

"Look," he said, "it comes down to this. We had a few drinks together and I kissed you, and then you got the wacky idea we ought to get married. I said it was a wacky idea then, and I should have stuck to my guns. But it still isn't too late, Stacey. I can take you home and you can tell Aunt Harrie all about it, and she'll go with you to a lawyer in the morning."

Stacey wrenched her hand free. There was no color in her face at all. Only her eyes seemed alive, accusing.

"You're backing down!"

"If you want to put it that way," Jonnie said steadily. "But it isn't quite that, really."

Stacey laughed. Angry, pitched laughter.

"What else?"

"Well," he said, "I'd call it taking time out to think."

Her head lifted. "You mean, I'm on probation as a wife?"

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Jonnie sounded strangely weary. "We'll both be on probation with each other. If you don't want to see a lawyer tomorrow, okay. But it's five o'clock in the morning and no time to be making decisions. We've already made one rash one tonight. So now I'm taking you home."

Stacey stood there, white, unmoving. She thought how tired Jonnie looked, yet how stern, too. She thought of the warm feeling that had encased her walking up the gravel pathway with him to be married, her sureness afterward. Now all of that was crumbling away from her.

Suddenly, she couldn't bear it. She stepped close to Jonnie. She put up her arms about his wide shoulders, flung back her head.

She spoke with her lips tremulous, parted, almost on his. "You think I'm sorry I married you, Jonnie. You think I don't want to go through with things. Well, I'll show you how much I do!"

STACEY SET HER mouth on his. She kissed Jonnie as she had never kissed anyone in her life before, as she had never wanted to. She was the flame dancing in the grate. She was all the youth and passion in the world, the lovely, surrendering youth.

Then there was only that other fire, the fire in the grate. The glow inside Stacey had died. She stepped back, slim, swaying in her black dress, and her voice was a dull sobbing breath.

"You didn't even kiss me back," she said.

He turned, picked up her wrap. "That's right," he said, "I didn't." He held her wrap for her. There was a funny little twist to his firm mouth. "I'm not made of wood, so it didn't seem like a good idea. Shall we go, Stacey?"

She wanted to strike the grin from his face. She wanted to do something, anything, that would make him feel the sharp, plunging pain in her own breast. Instead she let him slip the wrap about her shoulders.

There was light in the sky as Jonnie drove her home. Stacey didn't see it. There was a veil before her eyes. A veil of bitterness and hurt, of anger and bleakness and shame.

Jonnie must have felt it, known it. He put his hand on her arm outside her door.

"Stacey, whatever you decide . . ."

Stacey looked down at the hand. She shook it aside fiercely. "Please," she said. "There's nothing to say. Not now. Not ever."

She went into the silent house. She crept up the stairs and left her gown like a little pool of black water on the floor, and got into bed.

She lay there a long time, wide-eyed, staring into the pearl-gray and coral of the dawn. Not thinking about Kym Carmichael, whom she had lost.

Thinking about Jonnie Fenton, who had married her and let her go.

In the morning when she awoke there was a heaviness inside her, a sort of numbing ache. It was, oddly, like waking up with nothing to wake up for. When Stacey opened her eyes, Aunt Harriet was beside her bed.

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"It's past noon," she said. "Aren't you ever going to wake up? And for heaven's sake, what time did you get home last night? And for that matter, where were you?"

"Out with Jonnie." Stacey closed her eyes again. "Driving."

"Well!" Aunt Harriet said. "Well, I must say! It was certainly a peculiar time to pick to go driving, in the middle of your very own engagement party!"

"Who said it was my engagement party?"

"Kym." Aunt Harriet was righteously indignant. "He asked me to announce the engagement last night, actually begged me to. And where were you? Out driving with Jonnie Fenton! And what was Camilla doing here? Who asked her? Of all the mixed-up evenings I ever heard of! Heaven only knows what Kym must think."

"Darling," Stacey sounded weary, "I've an idea Kym doesn't think anything. I've an idea his mind is occupied with other matters. So if I were you, I wouldn't think too much, either."

"Am I to understand that you don't intend to explain things?" Aunt Harriet said.

STACEY TURNED HER face to the wall. "There isn't anything to explain." Or too much, she thought, and I'm not fit for any more arguments, not after last night.

Aunt Harriet walked to the door, muttering slanders against the younger generation.

"I haven't time to go into this now, Stacey. We'll talk about it later. I'm due at the Kirbys' for lunch, and then bridge. If you intend to lie in bed all day, I'll send your breakfast up to you."

The door closed. Stacey stared at the wall. But the wall had a face on it, so she closed her eyes again. Only the face was still there.

She thought, I'll get dressed. I'll go over and see him. I'll tell him what I think of him. I'll tell him I despise him.

And then she thought, wondering, But that isn't true. It would be like despising myself. Yes, that's the way I feel about him, as if he were part of me. I can't blame him for what he did last night. Any real man would have done the same.

Stacey lay very still, because the thing that was taking shape inside her was a little frightening.

"Jonnie," Stacey said into the room's stillness, "Jonnie-on-the-spot. You were always there, and I never knew."

The maid brought her breakfast. Stacey ate toast and drank coffee, two cups. She didn't taste anything. She kept staring at the pale green satin coverlet before her, blindly.

Finally she got up and took a warm shower, knowing all the while what she was going to do, and trembling a little at the thought.

She was going to Jonnie, without shame, without pretense. Words tumbled over in her mind, simple, direct.

Look, it's morning. I wanted to be

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your wife last night, and you told me to go home, think things over. Well, I've thought, and I'm here. I've been an awful fool about Kym Carmichael. I made up my mind he was for me, and he wasn't, he was for Camilla. But that's all right. Jonnie, you're not romantic, not on the surface, anyway. But I'd rather have you kiss me than Kym Carmichael any day. What I'm trying to say is that I'm in love with you, Jonnie.

No, that certainly was no way to tell a man you were in love with him, not somebody else, as you had been crying to him for ages. There must be some clearer way to explain things, some way you could make him see you had been in love with romance, and not with the other man at all.

She couldn't find it anywhere, the black beaded evening purse she had carried last night. And there were things in it she wanted, her lipstick, her compact, and yes, most important of all, her marriage certificate. Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Fenton. Oh. Lord, please let it stay that way! I don't want it any other! You idiot, you left your bag in Jonnie's car, or at his place.

She was feverishly powdering her face when she heard the whirr of tires in the drive way. She didn't look out the window. She didn't dare. She flew down the wide stairway, pulled up short on the living room threshold.

"Oh! Hello, Kym," Stacey said. She might have known. Jonnie always honked, didn't he?

KYM STOOD THERE, the afternoon light etching all his tall slimness his, jet hair, and he was suddenly handsomer than ever.

"Stacey," he said. He took a step toward her. "I want to tell you about last night."

"No. Wait!" She shook her head, breathless. "I want to tell you."

"I know," Kym said. He was tense, grave. "You saw Camilla and me in the library. You must have thought—God knows what. You went off with Jonnie, and I don't blame you. But Stacey, you've got to listen to me. I don't give a damn what you saw, because it didn't mean anything."

"Didn't it?" Stacey said. "I think it meant a lot. You kissed her, didn't you?"

Kym's mouth was an odd, stubborn line. "Certainly, I kissed her. If you were a man and you had been in love with a girl once, and she said she still loved you, you would want to kiss her before marrying anyone else. You would want to make sure there wasn't a vestige of the old feeling left. It would seem to you the only fair thing to do."

Stacey stared. "And?"

"And," Kym said, dark eyes staring back, "there wasn't."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"No," Kym said. "But I can prove it."

Her brows drew together. "How?"

Kym said, "Ask Aunt Harriet. Get her to tell you when I begged her to announce our engagement. You'll find it was eleven o'clock, exactly a half hour after the scene in the library. I

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think that proves I still love you, Stacey. I still want to marry you."

Her head jerked around. And in that instant, she was quite sure Kym Carmichael was the handsomest man she had ever seen.

She said, "Kym, dear, I'm awfully sorry, but last night Jonnie and I were . . ."

A lovely, lilting voice from the doorway said, "Yes? Jonnie and you?"

Camilla stood there, very tall, very beautiful, in a beige woolen sports outfit. Something in her limpid green eyes had a challenging sureness.

Kym said, "What are you doing here?" He sounded abruptly sharp.

Camilla came in. She sat down in a corner of the couch, crossed one long slim leg over the other.

"Following you, of course," she said simply. "If you weren't home, you were likely to be here." She started to lean her head back, sat up again as if something struck her. "Oh, am I interrupting anything?"

"Yes," Kym said.

Camilla smiled. "A proposal, perhaps? You were asking Stacey to marry you as I came in just now, weren't you?"

STACEY THOUGHT SHE had never seen Kym's black gaze so utterly alien.

"Yes, if it's any of your damned business, I was."

Camilla smoothed her skirt. "How can you mean it after last night?"

Kym said grimly, "I would be very grateful if you'd get out of here and let me explain last night to Stacey myself."

Stacey frowned. She thought, This is boring. It's exactly like a domestic quarrel, and I'm caught in the middle of it.

She sighed. "When you're both finished, I still have something to say."

Camilla studied her exquisite brown suede shoes. "You don't object to my getting in my say first, do you, Stacey?"

"No, of course not."

Camilla raised a serene glance to Kym's hostile one. "Before you do any more explaining to Stacey," she said, very gently, "why don't you ask her what she was doing in Jonnie's apartment at five o'clock this morning?"

The room was electrically quiet. Over at the grand piano, Stacey's fingers were abruptly still, plunged into the flowers. Kym's tall darkness was motionless, statuelike, too.

And his voice was a fine, thin thread. "What are you talking about, Camilla? What are you trying to insinuate?"

"Of course," Camilla said seriously, "I realize that Jonnie's my brother. I'm extremely fond of him, too, believe it or not. So naturally I loathe making ungallant accusations against him. It would be much pleasanter and easier to pretend I didn't know anything about Stacey being at his place at that ungodly hour. And if things had gone differently, I assure you that's exactly what I would have done. But Kym, as long as you're still so fired with enthusiasm about marrying her, I just don't see how I can stand by and let her make a com-

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plete fool out of you without saying anything."

Kym had his hands clenched deep in his pockets. "Very kind of you, I'm sure. Do you realize you're making accusations against Stacey, too?" He took an involuntary step forward. "I ought to . . ."

The lovely voice stopped him, gentle again. "Yes, I realize it. But I don't think she'll deny anything. I think she'll be smart enough to realize she can't. You see, last night I couldn't sleep. So I finally got up and dressed, and took myself for a ride. I passed Jonnie's place and there was a light on and I thought I'd go up and bother him. And then, just as I was parking, out they came, Jonnie and Stacey, together. They went off in Jonnie's car. Neither of them noticed me." Camilla paused. "That's what I meant about Stacey being too smart to deny she was there. It would be easy to prove by the elevator man and the night doorman, wouldn't it?"

Stacey suddenly felt weak.

KYM WAS LOOKING at Camilla. There was horror in his gaze. "You must be mad to lie like this!" he said. He swung around passionately. "Stacey, tell her she's lying!"

For the first time green eyes met hazel ones. "No," said Camilla quietly, "I'm not lying. You were in my brother's apartment at five o'clock this morning, weren't you?"

Stacey drew a deep breath. She could still hear Kym's voice, begging her to give the lie to Camilla's words.

She said, very low, "It's true."

She was aware of Camilla, sinking back against the couch, almost felt the river of relief pulsing through her. Then Kym was close.

"Stacey! My God, not you, of all people! I believed in you, staked everything on you!" There was the agony of a tortured soul in Kym's black eyes. "You and Jonnie—Stacey, how could you?"

She caught her breath. She put her hand on his arm, as if her touch would lessen the hurt.

"Kym, before you go rushing to conclusions, listen to me. Every word Camilla says is true, I was in Jonnie's apartment. I had every right to be there." She flung back her head a little. "You see, Jonnie and I were married last night!"

Again that electrical tension settled like a thunder-clap over the room. And out of the silence, Kym's voice came, dazed.

"Married? You and Jonnie married?"

"Yes. Oh, I know it's hard to believe, but it's true, just the same. We didn't tell anyone. We just went ahead and did it."

Camilla was sitting bolt upright. Her face was a white cameo.

"You married Jonnie last night? Where?"

"At Riverton. Does that seem so strange to you? Everybody around here who elopes gets married in Riverton. You and Kym did."

"What was the minister's name?" Camilla might have been an interrogating judge.

"Smith, Brown. How do I know? I

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didn't ask." She had been too carried away by that feeling of rightness that came with marrying Jonnie.

Stacey looked at Camilla with her green eyes narrowed, and Kym, all dark bewilderment. How could she explain to those two what she hadn't explained to Jonnie yet, what she didn't even know how to explain to him?

Camilla spoke slowly. "Forgive us for being somewhat amazed, Stacey. But this story seems so very odd, especially knowing Jonnie as I do. I can hardly picture him running off in the middle of the night to get married, particularly to a girl who was engaged to another man."

"Can't you?" Stacey was beginning to feel anger tingle inside her. "I didn't consider myself engaged to Kym. Not after that very charming reconciliation scene you staged in the library."

"It wasn't a reconciliation scene." Kym caught her up, his mouth set. "I've already told you that. And seeing isn't always believing, Stacey. You could have come to me, had things out with me there and then, instead of dashing off and doing whatever you did with Jonnie."

STACEY SAID, "WHAT do you mean, whatever I did with Jonnie? Are you both trying to tell me you don't believe Jonnie and I are really married? That I just cooked up that alibi on a moment's notice because Camilla told you she saw me leaving his apartment at what she terms an ungodly hour?"

Kym looked unhappy. "You didn't mention anything about being married to Jonnie before Camilla came."

Her voice was crisp with the drumming fury inside her. "I didn't get a chance, did I? Anyway, how dare either of you question me like this?"

Kym looked unhappier yet. "You don't seem to realize your reputation is at stake. If Camilla saw you leaving Jonnie's apartment, other people may have, too."

"Besides which," Camilla was gazing at her shoes again, "you've made a statement everybody's going to question. You've said that Jonnie and you were married last night. And maybe you were." Her smile held a sweet, knowing edge. "In that case, the simplest thing to do is to offer some sort of proof, isn't it?"

Stacey's lashes came together against that bright-edged smile. Then she laughed suddenly.

"If you're suggesting I produce my marriage certificate, I haven't got it. It was in my purse, and I couldn't find the thing anywhere today. I must have left it in Jonnie's car, or at his place."

Kym's voice was queerly tensed. "You lost it, Stacey?"

Her head came up. "No. Mislaid it."

"Heavens!" Camilla spoke on a mocking little murmur. "What a careless way to treat a marriage certificate!"

Stacey opened her mouth, closed it again abruptly. From outside had come a familiar sound—three long honks from a car horn in the drive-

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way. Her heart jerked high inside her, and she was all at once sure and strong.

"From now on," she said, "you can both refer all your questions to my husband!"

He came in, very big and tall, with his thick brown hair the least bit rumpled as usual.

"Hello," he said, "I just dropped by to . . ." Then he trailed off as his gray gaze took in the others.

Stacey said, her voice pitched a little high, "Step right in, Jonnie. There's an inquisition going on, and I'm getting off the rack, making way for you. Camilla is laboring under the misapprehension she can discredit my reputation because she saw us coming out of your apartment house at five this morning."

Jonnie looked at Camilla, brows raised. "You did? But that's a very unladylike hour to go visiting. So you see, it couldn't possibly have been Stacey you saw, Cam, darling."

Camilla said patiently, "Jonnie, Stacey has already admitted it. So don't waste time trying to play the gentleman."

JONNIE'S GLANCE WENT to Stacey. "You admitted it?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't I? I haven't anything to hide. I've told them everything else, too." Her lacquer-red mouth twisted ever so slightly. "I've met with some derision and doubt on that score, because unfortunately I didn't have any proof to offer. Jonnie, did you happen to find my black evening purse."

"Why, yes," Jonnie said, "I did. You left it in the car. I stopped by to give it to you." His hand went into his tweed pocket.

Stacey took the evening purse from him. Her fingers trembled despite herself, opening it, searching through the contents. When she looked up, her eyes were wide.

"Jonnie, it's gone!"

"What's gone?" he asked.

"Our marriage certificate! I know it was in here. You gave it to me yourself!"

"I gave you *what?*" Jonnie said.

Stacey just stood there. She felt as if everything were draining out of her. That cool, blank look on Jonnie's face seemed to be doing it.

"Our marriage certificate," she whispered, shaken. "Jonnie, you know we were married in Riverton last night. Tell them we were!"

"Yes," Camilla said. Her voice was perilously soft. "Tell us, Jonnie. Play the gentleman again. Say that you and Stacey were married last night. Say that that's the reason she was in your apartment. That's the proper thing to do, shield her. Don't break any of Kym's illusions about her. And if you want to play the gentleman to the finish, you can even manage to sneak off and marry her, get a quick annulment afterward, so that she and Kym . . ."

Jonnie turned around. There was still that same utter blankness on his face.

"What the devil are you all talking about? I don't know a damn thing about any marriage." His jaw-line

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tightened warningly. "And if any of you here think I'm fool enough to play gentleman to that extent and lie about it, you're crazy!"

Stacey wasn't leaning against the piano now. She was clinging to it.

"Jonnie!" she said, in a voice that was sheer horror. "Jonnie Fenton, are you standing there and denying that we were married last night?"

He faced her, brows together. "Listen, Stacey, I'm your friend, and I'll go a long way to help you. But that doesn't mean I'm willing to follow you blindly into any conspiracy you care to concoct, because I'm not." He flung out his hands in a helpless gesture. "All I know is that you had a quarrel with Kym last night, and you dragged me off to buy you a few drinks. Which I did, like the gentleman I am. Then you said you didn't want to go home, so I took you up to my place for another drink. Now, if you want to twist anything as simple as that into a marriage . . ."

STACEY MOVED THEN. She did it automatically, under a fierce impulsion. She looked up at Jonnie, and her eyes were bitter, burning.

"Thanks!" she said, and her voice broke. Her laughter broke, too. It cracked under the taut whip that was lashing her heart. "Thanks, Jonnie-on-the-spot! You're quite right. I didn't marry you last night. I married the man I thought you were, the sane, decent person. And do you want to know something else funnier yet? I woke up this morning, after thinking things over, the way you told me to, and I was actually stupid enough to imagine I was in love with you! Yes, that I always had been, that Kym was just a sort of a fixation, an obsession. I was going to come and beg you for the chance to be your wife. But now none of that's important any more, none of it counts. Because, my dear Mr. Jonathan Fenton, you can go plumb to Hades!"

She smiled at Jonnie through the tears, burning her eyes. Then she was a slim whirlwind, fleeing from Kym's shocked gaze, Camilla's victorious one, the expressionless, hazy blur that was Jonnie's face.

Her cheek was in the pillow. She was crying, crying for a lost faith, a lost loyalty. There weren't any such things in the world, really. People kidded themselves along, believed in other human beings. There was nothing to believe in. There was only this dark fire of hate and hurt that ate into your soul, that devoured the finest in you. Jonnie, too. Jonnie was no different. Jonnie was caught up in this horrid spell of living. Jonnie could turn his back on the truth, if it suited him, like anyone else. Jonnie could marry you one moment, send you home the next. He could deny even the precious ember of truth and normalcy that had flared for an instant between you.

A voice said conversationally, "They've gone."

Stacey didn't turn. She didn't stir. It was easier, much easier, to lie there and weep. Perhaps, if you cried enough, you could cry the hurt, the disillusionment out of you. Perhaps

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it would all be washed away for good.

Strong fingers prodded her shoulders. Stacey buried her face deeper at their touch.

"Go away," Stacey said, but the words were muffled and they might have been anything.

Certainly the voice didn't understand them. "Are you crying about Kym?"

"Go away," Stacey said again.

"Uh-huh. But not before I give you this." Something was thrust into her clenched hand.

Stacey held it, not stirring. "Give me what?" she said then, and all the bitterness and aching disillusionment spilled over into the words.

"You know," Jonnie said. "Our marriage certificate. The thing you asked me for downstairs. And I'm not going to hell, Stacey Fenton. I already went there last night when I sent you home. I had hours, centuries of it. Do you want to turn over and be human, now?"

STACEY LAY ABSOLUTELY still. "Get off my bed," she said. But she said it in a very small voice.

"There may be legal technicalities about that one, but they don't interest me at the moment, because I'm staying right where I am. Listen, did you say you were in love with me, or did you not?"

"I did not," Stacey said.

Jonnie said, "That's where witnesses come in handy. Listen, honey, stop struggling. Either you sit on my lap like a lady, or I set you across my knees like a brat. That's better. Now, we were talking about Kym and Camilla."

"Liar," Stacey said. She had her face turned into a broad shoulder. She had an awful thump in her heart. "You even lie about getting married, don't you?"

"Yes, when it's to my advantage. But I always turn the marriage certificate over to my wife afterward. And don't clutch it so tightly. You'll rub the writing off."

Stacey said, "You lied. You lied, when I needed you most!"

Jonnie sounded angry. "What the devil did you think I was going to do? Turn you over to Kym Carmichael, lock, stock and barrel? That's what might have happened if I'd provided you with the neat alibi of having married me on the spur of the moment."

Stacey said, "I didn't marry you on the spur of the moment. If I had wanted to marry anyone that way, I could have married Kym. He asked me to enough times, and I never got around to doing it. You can make anything you like out of that."

There was a firm cheek against her bright hair.

"I can make a lot," Jonnie said. "Now, anyway. Last night all I could make out of it was straight Scotches, and the fact that I had been low enough to let you drink them, even encourage you. Because I thought you had a broken heart. Because I thought, if I popped the question, very casually, you might want to marry me on the rebound, as they say."

Stacey's voice was little, muffled

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against Jonnie's tweed. "You didn't pop the question. I did."

"That made it all the more complicated." Jonnie's voice was muffled, too, against Stacey's hair. "It made me all the more of a louse, for taking you up. That's why I had to send you home."

"Why?" Stacey asked. "You're clear as mud. I never wanted to go home, anyway."

"How was I to know that?" Jonnie's voice was a shade husky. "All I knew was about the Scotches I'd let you drink accidentally on purpose, and Camilla and Kym in the library. That, and being in love with you forever, I guess."

"WHAT?" STACEY DEMANDED.

"Camilla and Kym . . ."

"Oh, stop!"

"All right, then. Being in love with you forever, and knowing it wasn't a damn bit of good."

"Jonnie," Stacey said, tremulous, "you can kiss like anything."

"Sure, I know that. Is that why you married me?"

"No. Because I knew it was right. Because I wanted to. Jonnie, you can be in love with romance, can't you?"

"Or a knight without armor?"

"Um, that's what I mean. But it needn't be a real love. It can be just a little-girl love."

"And maybe you don't know it, huh?"

"Maybe you don't know it. Then somebody, not nearly so romantic looking, comes along and kisses you—like anything—and you know it. So you want to marry him and give yourself to him forever, and have a house and children . . ."

"Look," said Jonnie, "you'd sound a lot more intelligible if you would stop crying."

"I know. But I can't. Jonnie, did you or did you not say you loved me?"

"I did," he said. "But that's a minor detail. Don't you want to know about that precious sister of mine and her ex? He's probably well on his way to being her husband again. They're still in love with each other. All their troubles started because Kym wanted to write. Camilla insisted he go back to lawyering, and Kym insisted he write. You know how Cam is, sort of overwhelming, overbearing. He got the idea she was trying to rob him of his individuality, telling him what to do. And he wanted to be the boss. That's what made him cling to you. He thought . . ."

"Jonnie, stop!"

"My guess is he'll take Cam, and like it. After all, he can always lawyer in the daytime and write in his spare moments. That's the obvious compromise, isn't it? If they hadn't been a couple of dopes, they would have thought of it long ago. And just what are you thinking about at this moment, my beautiful?"

Stacey whispered. "Just how nice it is being in your arms, and how much nicer it would be if you kissed me."

Stacey said against his firm mouth, "Jonnie-on-the-spot. Now it'll always be that way."

"Always," Jonnie said, and gathered her closer. ♡ ♡ ♡

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Loves That Live Forever

by Everett H. Ortner

PICTURE HIM AS he was: a dandy in the tradition of Beau Brummel; a ladies' man; a dashing, suave, haughty man-about-town. His favorite outfit consisted of black velvet coat, plum-colored trousers embroidered with gold, a scarlet waist-coat, white gloves. He was the darling of London society. His books had taken the world of fashion by storm, his rapier-sharp wit had won him hundreds of sighs and adoring looks. Wherever he went, the whisper followed him: "There goes Benjamin Disraeli. . . ."

Picture her: a pretty but quiet woman, ignored by fashionable society, content to live in her small circle of friends and take care of her husband, Wyndham Lewis, who was a member of Parliament.

Disraeli—Dizzy, as his friends called him—was accustomed to having ladies request that he be presented to them. And that was how he met Mary Anne Lewis. He mentioned the meeting casually in a letter to his sister Sarah. He was obviously not much impressed by Mrs. Lewis.

"I was introduced 'by particular desire' to Mrs. Wyndham Lewis, a pretty little woman, a flirt, and a rattle; indeed gifted with a volubility I should think unequaled, and of which I can convey no idea. She told me that she liked 'silent, melancholy men. . . .' "

That was that. The ambitious Disraeli scarcely gave her a second thought. He was too preoccupied with his other affairs—getting money and winning a seat in Parliament. Half seriously he told Sarah, "By the by, would you like Lady Z. for a sister-in-law, very clever, £25,000 and domestic? As for 'love,' all my friends who have married for love and beauty either beat their wives or live apart from them. . . . I may commit many follies in life, but I never intend to marry for love. . . ."

At a dinner party, he again saw Mary Anne Lewis. The lady of the house suggested, "Mr. Disraeli, will you take Mrs. Wyndham Lewis in to dinner?"

"Oh, anything rather than that insufferable woman!" he replied. "However . . ." And went forth to do his painful duty.

But time changed his mind. He was engrossed in politics now, making speeches, meeting famous politicians, and in the course of this life he met her often. He got to know the true woman beneath the flirtatious surface. She wasn't witty in the manner of the great society ladies, but there was a core of

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good humor, of kindness, that was more important. And he was greatly impressed by her good sense. She had a sound knowledge of politics, and her opinion was widely sought by ambitious statesmen.

During the Parliamentary campaign of 1837, Disraeli worked side by side with her husband, and she played the part of campaign advisor to both of them. She was sure that Disraeli would be successful. "Mark what I prophesy," she wrote a friend. "Mr. Disraeli will in a very few years be one of the greatest men of his day. . . ."

Hard work and shrewd campaigning won the day: both Disraeli and Lewis were elected, and great was the celebration among that happy trio. But soon the shadow of tragedy loomed over their heads. Only six months after the election, Wyndham Lewis died. Mary Anne was overcome by grief.

During that troubled period, her faithful 'Dizzy' was constantly at her side. If he thought he had known her before, he now realized that he had had but the merest inkling of the strength and fineness of her character.

"I can truly say," he wrote her, "that the severe afflictions which you have undergone, and the excellent, and to me unexpected, qualities with which you have met them, the talent, firmness and sweet temper, will always make me your faithful friend, and as far as my advice and assistance and society can contribute to your welfare, or solace you under these severe trials, you may count upon them."

But the unexpected happened. The close association, the friendly intimacy, changed subtly, metamorphosed into something that surprised them both. His letters, once signed, "ever your affectionate friend," changed to, "Farewell! I am happy if you are."

Where formerly his sister had been his sole confidante, now he took all his problems and his triumphs to Mary Anne.

But marriage? Association with her had taught him to respect her fine intelligence and character, even—he dared not dwell on this—possibly to love her. But his was a world of high society, of fashion. How would she fit into this world?

And then money. She had much; he had little. Would the world say that he had married for money? He could not bear the thought of her being thus maligned. And it was just possible that she might harbor the same unworthy suspicion. . . .

Malicious acquaintances had been busy planting just this idea in her mind. Painfully she wrote her dear Dizzy of the suspicions of her friends. She had to make sure that it was not true, she explained.

He was enraged.

"By heavens," he stormed, "as far as worldly interests are concerned, your alliance could not benefit me. All that society can offer is at my command. . . . I can live, as I live, without disgrace. . . . No; I would not condescend to be the minion of a princess; and not all the gold of Ophir should ever lead me to the altar. . . .

"Farewell. . . . The time will come when you will sigh for any heart that could be fond, and despair of one that can be faithful. . . ."

She answered in the fewest possible words: "Come to me. . . ."

They were married in August, 1839, a little less than two years after her first husband's death. In her diary she wrote, "Today dear Dizzy became my husband."

Slowly the years passed after their marriage—happy years, fruitful years. England and the world came to know the name Disraeli. His great voice filled the house of Parliament, and even cynical members hastened from the ward-

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robe room to resume their seats when he spoke.

Honors fell to him like ripe plums in his twin careers as novelist and statesman. On the flyleaf of his book *Sybil* he wrote: "I would inscribe these volumes to one whose noble spirit and gentle nature ever prompt her to sympathize with the suffering; to one whose sweet voice has often encouraged, and whose taste and judgment have ever guided, their pages; the most severe of critics, but—a perfect wife!"

And when he became Prime Minister of England, the first to whom he rushed with his triumph was again his dear Mary Anne.

When he stood on the platform at Oxford University to receive an honorary degree, he scanned the audience earnestly. Then, before the assembled nobles and great of England, he blew her a kiss.

But the years were passing. Ten . . . twenty . . . thirty. . . .

They became old, but their love never wavered. So tender was her care of him that he once marveled, "My dear, you are more of a mistress to me than a wife!"

The illnesses that beset age were theirs, and they lay in separate rooms of their London town house—writing notes to each other.

Wrote he: "I have nothing to tell you except that I love you, which, I fear, you will find rather dull."

Wrote she: "If I should depart before you, do not live alone, dearest. I earnestly hope you may find someone as attached to you as your own devoted Mary Anne."

Dizzy never took this advice, although he survived his Mary Anne by fifteen years. Where could he find anyone like her?

Symptoms

The sky is new as spangling song,
An echo made of dreams,
And gay and stormy sweetness
Is warm with rhythm gleams

There's rakish-giddy starlight
Like golden lanterns swinging,
And tender-foolish memories
To set my pulses singing—

I think of eager footfalls
And words that softly wear
Warm-singing steel and laughter
And tall and sunburned hair. . . . .

Now isn't this a silly way
To say that you'll be calling—?
But—oh, my dear, I hope I'm not
The only one that's falling.

—*Gladys Martin*

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For Love Of Rod

by Hillary Warren

In love, as in fishing, the bait doesn't matter—it's the catch.

RODNEY BAXTER GAVE the spinning-rod an experimental flip and watched the artificial minnow sail beautifully over the counter to affix its hooks in the hem of Ella Simmons' skirt.

"Lame-brain!" she yowled.

Desperately Rodney set the reel and tried to retrieve as Mr. Wright, the owner-manager of the store, ran up to Ella. "Remember," he hissed from the corner of his mouth, "the customer is always right, Miss Simmons." He turned with a forced smile to Rodney who was still reeling. The line grew taut and began to raise Miss Simmons' skirt. She came slithering over to the counter holding onto the artificial minnow, her skirt, and her honor. By this time the crowded store was sharing the fun.

"You've got a beaut," someone shouted. "Don't let her get away. Give her more slack or she'll throw the hook."

Ella glared at her tormenters then swung back to the manager. "Lame-brain, I still say, Mr. Wright," she repeated angrily. Mr. Wright threw up his hands and ducked gracefully behind a pile of minnow buckets.

"For heaven's sake stop reeling," Ella shouted. "Do you think I'm a salmon?"

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Finally Rodney placed the rod in its rack and knelt to extract the lure. "Honestly I didn't know what I was doing," he said. "I'm strictly a fly-rod man." He fumbled with her skirt and with a jerk succeeded in tearing the lure free along with a generous chunk of cloth.

He had missed her green eyes and flaming hair in the excitement. Now he couldn't. Her eyes "greened" and her hair "flamed." "And who pays for the skirt," she demanded vehemently.

Rodney arose apologetically and looked down at the fire burning up at him. "Of course, I will," he said defensively.

"Fine. That'll be fifty-nine fifty," the flame said.

"Ouch," Rodney said. "And where do you buy your skirts—Paris?"

"It so happens, fisherman, that you have not caught a sucker," Ella said evenly. "This skirt goes with a suit and you can't find a skirt to match. I know. I've tried."

"Double ouch," Rodney said.

A voice cut in. "That's outrageous." Rodney turned to watch Cynthia Graham, his fiancée, step from the dispersing crowd. She tossed an icy stare at Ella then melted it for Rodney.

He found new strength in her statuesque blondeness. She was always around when he needed her most. "Cynthia, this . . ." he pointed an accusing finger at Ella " . . . says her skirt cannot be replaced for less than sixty bucks."

The color of Ella's face almost matched her hair now. "First I'm a sucker and now I'm a 'this'," she said defiantly.

Cynthia grasped Rodney's arm and half turned him toward the door. "Let's hurry, Rod. Selma's cocktail party is nearly over." She threw a verbal slap over her shoulder. "Miss, Mr. Baxter will get in touch with you and make the necessary restitution." She swept Rodney from the scene like a broom would a feather.

Halfway to the party Rodney let out a yowl and slowed the convertible. "Cynthia, in the excitement at Wright's I left 'Martha' on the counter."

Cynthia gave him a quizzical stare. "'Martha?'" she asked, eyebrows raised.

"My fly-rod. I wanted their man to give her a new varnish job."

"Oh, that," Cynthia said. "Call the store tomorrow and explain it to them." She slipped closer to Rodney and touched her foot to the accelerator. The car shot forward. "We'll just never get to Selma's party," she said.

RODNEY SHOOK A cloudy head. It had been some party at Selma's yesterday, he mused as he glanced at his watch. Cynthia would be along in ten minutes. He tried again to concentrate on the work before him only to be interrupted by the intercom. Miss Sheridan's crisp voice said, "Miss Graham is on her way in."

Rodney leaned back and drew strong fingers through his dark hair as Cynthia swept grandly in.

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"Darling, all ready for lunch?" she asked.

"Yes and no," Rodney answered rising. He gave her a discreet peck and lit two cigarettes. "As a matter of fact this Halliday case has me tied in knots and the boss is on my tail. And that party at Selma's didn't help."

Cynthia accepted the proferred cigarette, took a calculated puff, and sat on the edge of Rodney's desk, exposing two shapely legs. "As a matter of fact, Rodney, I wanted to talk to you seriously before we go to lunch. That's why I'm early," she said coyly.

Rodney stiffened perceptibly. "About the usual?" he questioned.

Cynthia gave him an if-looks-could-kill glance. "You'd think it was a crime. Just because I broached Father about giving you a job," she said. "When are you going to wise up? You know you'll be struggling in this law office for ten years before you'll make a decent salary."

Rodney ground out his cigarette and walked to the water cooler. "Look, Cynthia, I love you and respect your father but you don't seem to understand." He jabbed at the cooler, sipped hurriedly, then turned, forefinger leveled. "Please, this is the last time I want to discuss this whole business," he said emphatically.

Cynthia took another tack. "You don't have to wiggle that finger at me," she said, grabbing Rodney's finger playfully as he approached. "Father wired he would be in Connecticut the weekend of the fifteenth and he asked me to bring you along. He's anxious to meet his future son-in-law."

Rodney looked relieved. "That's more like it," he said. "I'd like to meet your dad." He squeezed Cynthia's waist and lifted her from the desk. "Let's put on the feed bag, I'm starved."

AT LUNCH HE did some heavy thinking. He had been out of law school only a year when he had first met Cynthia during a Christmas dance at the University Club. Except for her seemingly blind insistence on his giving up law and joining her father's importing firm, their relationship had been ideal. But lately it had reached the point where he wanted to leave the room every time she brought the subject up. The one other thing about her that had irritated him was her complete hostility whenever he mentioned her mother. She hardly ever mentioned her; it was almost as if she had been imported into this world without benefit of a mother.

"A penny?" Cynthia said, interrupting his thoughts.

Rodney looked up from his salad. "I was just wondering how your father would take me when we meet him on the fifteenth," he lied. Then he jumped up, his face turning the color of the green salad. "The fifteenth," he said dismally. "Are we to meet him on the fifteenth?"

Cynthia's blue eyes grew round. "What on earth? Why certainly. You agreed to go on the fifteenth."

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"But I can't," Rodney wailed.

Cynthia glanced at the other tables. People were beginning to look at them. "Sit down," she commanded. "Do you want to embarrass me?"

Rodney glanced around sheepishly then sat down. "But Cynthia, you don't understand. The fifteenth is the opening of the trout season. I didn't realize it when you asked me to go to Connecticut."

Cynthia gave Rodney a long, cold stare, then, with trembling hands, lit a cigarette. "You mean you would let a few smelly fish stand in the way," she said icily.

Rodney pleaded. "I haven't missed an opening day in fifteen years. Besides trout aren't smelly."

"Well, if you think I'll stand for a silly thing like this—fish . . ." She stopped hunting for words and stalked from the restaurant.

Rodney ended a dismal lunch hour in Wright's with only the prospect of "Martha" faithfully waiting for his gentle caress. He walked to the counter plastered with things fashioned from feathers and shiny bits of metal guaranteed to catch anything that used fins to get around. In the aisle stood a rack loaded with high-priced bamboo rods of every description. He carefully avoided a spinning rod and selected a whippy fly-rod.

"Careful does it," a pleasant voice said.

RODNEY LOOKED INTO the pleasant green eyes of Miss Simmons. He replaced the rod. "I'm sorry about yesterday," he said extracting a checkbook and pen and setting them on the counter.

Miss Simmons brushed his hand gently from the counter. "Forget it. You don't owe me a thing. Actually the skirt was very old and had another hole in it from fishing."

Rodney looked up. "You fish?" he asked, his thoughts on the beautiful Cynthia and her abhorrance of the sport.

Miss Simmons pointed to a large brown trout hanging overhead on the wall. "Caught that on the Ausable two years ago when my dad was alive," she said proudly.

Rodney felt a warm glow for this slip of a girl that could accomplish such a piscatorial deed. "That is a beautiful fish," he said in genuine admiration.

"Incidentally, did you leave this yesterday in the excitement?" Miss Simmons asked.

Rodney patted the rod cradled in her hands. "That's 'Martha.' I meant to have your man give her a new coat of varnish."

"Can do," Miss Simmons said. "I tested the action yesterday and she responds beautifully."

Rodney liked this girl; she talked his language. "Made it myself from the best Tonkin cane."

"What line does she handle?" she asked.

"I use one of those new triple taper torpedoes."

"I just bought one myself," Miss Simmons replied. "I'm going to try it this afternoon on our front lawn."

"You have a place to practice?"

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"Sure. I live over in Westport."

The feel of a rod in his fist and the sound of nylon swishing through the guides was too much for Rodney. He boldly asked, "Wonder if I could try 'Martha' on your front lawn?"

He picked her up at closing time and a short time later they pulled up in front of a rather run-down Victorian mansion. Ella jumped from the car. "Come on in and meet Mom while I get into something more suitable for the occasion," she said airily.

Mrs. Simmons proved to be a woman of medium height whose face radiated kindness. "Mother," Ella said, "this is Mr. Baxter."

"Oh, the man who hooked you yesterday," Mrs. Simmons said, her bright eyes sparkling with a touch of green. "How do you do, Mr. Baxter."

Rodney nodded insecurely. Mrs. Simmons continued, saying "Fishing isn't what it used to be." She went to a closet under the steps and extracted two long cane poles rigged with twine and two large corks. "Dad and I used to use them. Now I keep them for the neighborhood kids. We caught many a fish with them."

Rodney hefted the heavy cane poles politely. "While you two discuss the past and present of the art," Ella interrupted, "I'm going to change. Be back in a minute."

RODNEY ENDED UP in the kitchen, a big ham sandwich clamped in his fist. Ella, her red hair swept up, appeared wearing a snug fitting pair of jeans that accented the lithness of her body. Come on, Mr. Baxter," she said. "Time for you to display your skill. The eating can wait."

The front lawn was still in the torpor of early spring but it was warm as they rigged up their rods. Rodney watched Ella execute several false casts then complete a beautiful roll-cast. Her fly settled perfectly to the ground. "Whew," he whistled. "I haven't seen many men do that good."

Ella talked as she worked out more line. "You should have seen Dad. He won the state championship in twenty-seven and he just wasn't a tournament caster either. He caught his share of fish, all on artificial bait too. He taught me dangling a worm in a creek was a sacrilege."

"Ditto," Rodney said. "I'm strictly a purist too.

Ella reeled in and balanced her rod against a dormant rose bush. "Last year on a streamer I caught my limit in an hour."

Rodney stopped casting and stood his rod next to hers. He reached for his cigarettes. "Have one?" he asked as he pushed the pack toward her. They both lit up. "Where was this?" Rodney asked. "Last year I only had two small brookies on opening day."

"Spring creek. I have my favorite spot. Not many people know about it."

"How about letting me in on it."

Ella gave him a quick smile. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Baxter, I was going to ask if you would take me up

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there on opening day if it's not inconvenient for you."

"Love to," Rodney said. "It's a date." He felt a twinge of guilt as he thought of his refusal to meet Cynthia's father on the fifteenth. But she couldn't be expected to understand. In fact nobody could ever understand—except another fisherman.

CYNTHIA surprised him the next day by sweeping in at the usual time all primed for their standing luncheon date. He had meant to call her and smooth over yesterday but now she looked as though nothing had happened. She took her favorite place on the edge of his desk. "I'm sorry about yesterday," she began, "but you did hurt my feelings when you put fish before my father."

Rodney gave her her pre-luncheon kiss. "Fact is," he said, "some guys go for golf, some for whiskey, and some for women, but it happens that I like fishing."

Cynthia nodded. "And I go for young lawyers," she said. "But I've been a dope. Dad has his private stream stocked with trout. It runs right through the meadow behind the house. Why can't you do your fishing there and still meet Dad?"

Rodney took a short breath then exhaled slowly saying, "No-oo—wouldn't do." He was thinking about Ella and that pool up on Spring Creek. "Fact is fishing in a stocked stream is like—well it just isn't ethical to a purist. And besides I would have to get a Connecticut fishing license." His rationalization seemed sound at the moment.

Cynthia's face flushed perceptibly. "If I didn't know you better, Rod, I'd think you were lying to me."

"But honey," Rodney said, "it's the gospel."

The next three weeks with Cynthia were pleasant but nothing more. The evening of the fourteenth he took her to the train and saw her off to Connecticut. Afterwards he returned to his apartment, checked his fishing gear, and studied the weather reports. The streams should be in fair shape tomorrow. Before he turned in he called and checked with Ella. They would leave about four A.M.

RODNEY SLAMMED THE trunk on the gear. "All set?" he asked his breath visible in the crisp air. Ella took a hitch in her belt.

"Let's go, pard," she said taking her place beside Rodney in the convertible.

Rodney swung down the drive. "Like the heater?" he asked.

Ella reached over and turned the switch, flooding the car with a welcome warmth. "Love it. On a morning like this it's a necessity," she said.

Rodney turned onto the highway and stepped hard on the accelerator. He glanced sideways at Ella. "What kind of luck do you expect to have?" he teased.

"Oh, wouldn't be surprised if I caught my limit," she retorted.

"On what? Wet or dry flies?"

Ella smiled mysteriously. "A good fisherman doesn't reveal his secrets."

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Rodney looked thoughtful. "Tell you what," he said, "if you make the bigger catch, I'll take you out to dinner."

"You're on," Ella said. Rodney felt a trifle uneasy when he saw the glint of determination in Ella's eyes and realized the possible repercussions this whole business might have if Cynthia ever got wind of it.

They slipped by a stream, its banks sprinkled with scores of fishermen waiting for five A.M. Ella placed her hand on his arm as they bounced across a concrete bridge. "Turn left here," she said.

The gentle pressure of her hand felt warm and good as he swung off the main road and headed for the low foothills ahead. "About two miles yet," Ella said. "The road gets pretty rough."

As they climbed, the macadam gave way to mud. Soon there were only two ruts in which to maneuver the car. "I hope we can turn around if we have to," Rodney said. "I've fished the lower reaches of Spring Creek but never up this far."

"That's the beauty of it," Ella said. "Dad showed me this spot. It's just a series of small falls. The creek isn't more than three feet wide where we fish."

Rodney wrinkled his nose. "I like big, broad streams where a man can do some wading."

"Just don't forget our bet," Ella rejoined.

The road became nearly impassable now. "O.K., stop here. We'll have to hike the rest of the way," she said.

They unloaded and rigged up their gear, then started across a rocky field. A silvery grayness was just beginning to show in the east as they arrived at a small but clear mountain stream.

"What's the hour?" Ella asked as she greased her line.

Rodney glanced at his watch. "Two minutes to go." His eye followed the stream to where it widened. "I'll leave you to your ditch. I'm going downstream where a man can feel fast water against his boots," he announced.

After the first hour Rodney knew these trout weren't going to bite on artificial bait. He glanced guiltily upstream, then slipped a small can of worms from his creel. In another twenty minutes he had three nice rainbow trout, all over twelve inches, and he was ready to call it quits. He threw away the rest of the worms and started back. He found Ella standing at the edge of a small pool. Triumphantly he drew the three fish from his creel as he walked up. "Any luck," she said miserably.

"No fish, no date," he teased.

"So?" she asked.

"So had enough?" Rodney said. "I'm frozen." He sneezed convulsively.

"Me too," Ella agreed. "Let's get back to the car and get the heater going."

In the car Rod forgot the heater as Ella settled close beside him. It was the natural thing to do. His arm slid gently around her tiny waist and he drew her firmly to him. Her lips

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were warm and her body trembled slightly in natural surrender.

ROD AT LAST said huskily, "I guess I shouldn't have done that." He looked down at the red hair and green eyes. Ella said nothing and that made it all the worse. He berated himself mentally for his impulsive action. It was probably just the complete companionship of the moment—platonic stuff—probably trying to affirm his masculinity by an open show of rebellion because of Cynthia's abhorrance of his love of fishing.

On the way back they both said little. He dropped her in Westport and drove straight to his apartment. He felt a cold coming on and decided to forego the usual rehash of the morning's adventures with the gang at Joe's tavern.

Monday Cynthia found him in bed, two woolen socks tied around his throat, and a jumbo size box of Kleenex on the night table. She took one look and burst out laughing. "Why darling, was the fishing too rugged?" she teased. "Your secretary said you hadn't showed up at the office so I thought I'd take a look in here."

Rodney shrugged then between sneezes and managed to vent his displeasure. "I don't see anything funny about it."

Cynthia sat on the edge of the bed. "Oh, don't be so touchy. This is the first time I ever saw you so helpless. Want me to call the doctor?"

"No." He blew his nose for emphasis then reached for his atomizer.

Cynthia took it from his hand. "Here, let me," she said.

Rodney dutifully surrendered and opened his mouth as Cynthia let go with two big blasts. Rodney gasped and rubbed his watering eyes. "Enough." was all he could manage for the moment.

Cynthia took advantage of his enforced silence. "You missed a wonderful time," she began. "Dad was so disappointed when he learned that you hadn't come. He left for Chicago Sunday night after I started home."

"Doesn't he ever get tired of traveling?" Rodney gasped annoyed.

"Why should he?" Cynthia said coolly. "His whole life is wrapped up in his business and believe me he is successful.

"And I have the most marvelous news," she continued breathlessly. "Dad consented to make you manager of his Mexico City branch at ten-thousand a year to start. He said he'd be East the first of July and we could talk over the arrangements then."

RODNEY erupted from the bed, flinging the covers from him. He didn't care if he was wearing flowered pajamas. Too late Cynthia realized her mistake and tried to beat him to the punch. "Darling, get back in bed before you get pneumonia," she soothed.

"Pneumonia be hanged," Rodney roared. He began pacing up and down. "I told you . . .." His voice trailed away to nothing. Two squirts

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from the atomizer helped him sound like a rasp sliding over dry wood. "Cynthia," he began again adamantly. And he rasped roughly on for a full five minutes punctuating his tirade with occasional squirts from the atomizer. "To top it all," he finished, "your ubiquitous father expects me to be in Connecticut on the opening of the bass season, July the first."

After Cynthia left, Rodney pulled himself together with a big slug of bourbon, fished the engagement ring from under the bed where Cynthia had flung it and headed for Westport.

Mrs. Simmons met him at the door. "You too?" she said.

"Me too what?" Rodney asked.

"Your cold. Ella's in bed with a cold too. I'll take you right upstairs and you can sympathize with one another."

Mrs. Simmons led the way. "Hi, Red," Rodney greeted as they walked into Ella's room.

Ella gave one look and ducked under the covers. "Mother, how could you?" she wailed. Rodney gave Mrs. Simmons a puzzled look. "Make him wait in the hall until I look decent."

Mrs. Simmons left him alone in the hall. After a long wait he was let in to the delicate scent of apple-blossoms.

"Don't ever do that again," she said. sinking onto the bed.

"Silly girl," Rodney retorted. "You're all alike. I have a sister. She can't move without fixing her hair. Really vain."

"So." Ella pursed her lips.

"So I came to make a confession."

Ella's face took on an inquiring air. "A confession? About what?"

"Remember that fishing bet?"

She nodded in assent.

"It so happens that I cheated. I used worms."

"I thought you were strictly a purist," Ella chided.

"I am. But my masculine fisherman's pride couldn't bear the thought of you possibly catching more than I, so I used worms," Rod owned up.

Ella slipped into mules. "I have something to show you downstairs," she said. She took his hand but before she could lead him from the room Rod spun her slowly—and this time Cynthia be damned.

"Oh, Rod," Ella breathed softly.

"Rod what?" Rod asked huskily.

"What if you had never hooked me at Wrights?" she said.

Rod groped for an answer but settled for another kiss.

Ella finally slipped from his arms and mysteriously led him down to the kitchen where Mrs. Simmons was in the process of cleaning eight of the nicest trout Rodney ever saw.

"I caught them and hid them in my boots," Ella said proudly. "My woman's intuition told me that a man couldn't take it and I was right."

"In that case," Rodney said, "get dressed. You won the bet. We have a dinner date."

"Do you still want to go if I tell you I, too, used worms?"

"Honey, just so you never tell that gang of purists about us down at Joe's tavern." ♥ ♥ ♥

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The Lady Is a Schemer

by Hester Reina

. . . with honorable intentions—but no scruples.

SPRING IN SAN FRANCISCO is not quite like spring in other cities; nevertheless, there is a subtle something in the air that is likely to have its effect on the morale of young men. Especially young men who have just acquired a new job with a beautiful five-figure salary and an office that smacks of luxury, from the wool shag rug on the floor to the signed etchings on the walls. Bleached oak and dark red leather, a fireplace, a radio, a little private bar . . .

Alan Gaynor, filled with contentment and the Shamrock Grill's eighty-five cent breakfast, surveyed his new quarters with a certain degree of complacency. He lit a cigarette and moved to the big window to admire a really superior view of San Francisco only slightly blurred by fog. Old H. C. Radford certainly did things up brown—even to the view. All of which proved, in case anyone doubted it, that there was money in advertising.

Most important, Celeste would approve. He had his honorable discharge from Uncle Sam's Army and could afford to marry Celeste now, and give her the kind of life to which she was accustomed. He would tell her about it when he took her to dinner, which, he realized he ought to do this week sometime. Or maybe next week would be soon enough. Celeste was a wonderful girl, no doubt about that. Who else would have stuck by

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him so loyally when he got mixed up with those blondes?

Of course, when she had come to him afterward with her tearful but generous offer to resume their engagement, he had had to promise never to have anything more to do with blondes. And that was sometimes a hard promise to keep. But he had managed, with a little fast footwork here and there. After all, he owed Celeste something after the way she'd forgiven him—twice.

Celeste herself was a willowy brunette with patrician features appropriate to her patrician family. One of the blondes—Danielle, or was it Alysse?—had referred to her as a beanpole of uncertain ancestry, but that was just feminine pique.

Alan moved his shoulders a little, conscious of a restlessness that had been troubling him off and on the last few days. Funny though, when he felt like this, his thoughts invariably turned, not dutifully toward Celeste, but toward some blonde vision of loveliness. He felt like a heel. Maybe he was.

Alan scowled and brought his mind back sternly to the office. A secretary was supposed to go with this layout, if she ever got here. He glanced at his watch. Nine o'clock, on the nose.

There was a brisk knock on his door and before he had time to speak, a small, business-like girl entered and said, "Good morning, Mr. Gaynor. You *are* Mr. Gaynor, aren't you? I'm —oh, my!" This last, as Alan moved away from the window and she got a good look at him.

Alan was staring at her in horrified fascination—a blonde! And unquestionably a blonde within Celeste's meaning of the word. This was a situation he hadn't thought of and would have to deal with immediately. If Celeste ever got a good look at this girl, everything would be off—that was for sure! She was blonde with big blue eyes and clouds of yellow-gold hair framing a heart-shaped face, plus all the traditional man-baiting equipment, arranged with exquisite taste and a nice feeling for detail.

"Who are you?" he managed finally.

"I'm Nancy Moran," she said. "Your new secretary. Mr. Radford said I was to report to you at nine this morning." She glanced at a useless-looking watch on her wrist and looked extremely pleased with herself.

There was something about her voice that sent a shiver across Alan's shoulders. No one else had ever had quite this effect on him—not even Alysse, and certainly not Danielle. Alan sat down hurriedly behind his desk, crushed out his cigarette, and assumed a stern expression.

"I'm afraid you won't do," he said a little too loudly.

The girl stared at him, unbelieving, then her blue eyes narrowed. "Why won't I do?" she demanded. "Just tell me why!"

"You're too—uh—young." Alan felt his ears getting red. Her face was perfectly serious, but suddenly he had the absurd notion that this small

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blonde job saw right through him and was laughing at him.

"I'm twenty-one," Nancy Moran informed him with severe dignity. "That's not too young. I'm five-feet two inches tall and I wear size ten clothes and size five shoes, and my hair is naturally curly, in case you ask me, which everybody does sooner or later. Also, I got the highest marks in my class at business school and I can cook. Too," she finished on a note of triumph.

Alan smiled grimly. "We don't do much cooking in an advertising office," he observed.

"I wasn't thinking of the office," she retorted, and her tone could be described only as insinuating.

Alan stood up, pushing his chair back violently. "A man ought to be allowed to choose his own secretary!" he said, glaring. "This is a free country, isn't it?"

Nancy made no comment on the freedom of the country. She just looked him over admiringly, taking in his six-foot, tweed-clad length, his crisp black hair and stormy gray eyes. She said again, "Oh, my!"

"Will you kindly go back to Mr. Radford and tell him I prefer to pick my own office help?" Alan said, forcing himself to be calm.

Nancy said, "No. And it won't do you any good to go, either."

Alan took a deep breath and gave serious consideration to corporal punishment. A tempting idea, but he discarded it as undignified. He strode angrily out of the office, muttering.

Harvey Cameron Radford was a large, friendly man, well-padded and well-tailored, with shrewd blue eyes and thinning dark hair. He beamed at Alan and said, "What's on your mind, son?"

"About that secretary you sent me," Alan said. "She won't do. I'd like to get someone else and she thinks you won't stand for it."

H. C. Radford's smile disappeared and he looked at Alan coldly. "She's right," he said. "I won't. What's the matter with her?"

"She's a blonde," Alan explained, as if that took care of everything.

"Oh," H. C. said. After all, he hadn't reached the top of the advertising ladder without acquiring some understanding of people. "You have, perhaps, had some little difficulty with blondes?"

"I've never had anything but difficulty with them," Alan said bitterly. "And I've promised my fiancée never to get mixed up with another one. If I do, she'll break the engagement. Again," he added gloomily.

"Hm," H. C. commented. "Would you say that you're in danger of getting mixed up, as you call it, with Nancy?"

Alan thought of the way she had looked at him when she said, "Oh, my!" He remembered the fugitive shiver that ran across his shoulders. "She told me she could cook," he said simply.

"I see," H. C. said, and his eyes lost some of their steely look. "Nancy has never had much use for young men, either. Suppose you tell me about this fiancée of yours."

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"Celeste is a wonderful girl," Alan said automatically. "A brunette. We grew up together and got engaged a few years ago. Our parents were all for it. And then . . ." He paused, considering, and then went on doggedly, "I'm a heel. Right away, I met Danielle and sort of went overboard. My family went into a tailspin and Celeste broke the engagement, and I didn't care. And then Danielle met this old, dried-up millionaire—he must have been forty if he was a day."

"Take it easy!" H. C. roared, turning red. "I'm forty-eight and I don't . . ."

"Nobody could call you dried-up," Alan interposed hastily. "Some men are old at thirty. You know that."

"Okay," H. C. subsided. "Go on. This is getting interesting."

"Well," Alan said, warming to his subject, "it was about what you'd expect. I got a telegram at two o'clock one morning—woke me out of a sound sleep which I badly needed. Danielle and this stuffed shirt had eloped."

"And Celeste forgave you, I suppose?" H. C. inquired.

"She did," Alan said. "She was very generous and understanding. What could I do? I mean, I'd treated her badly, hadn't I?"

"Matter of opinion," his employer said shortly. "So you promised her . . ."

"That was later," Alan broke in. "After Alysse. She's the one that looked like a little blonde angel, only she wasn't very reliable, I guess. She ran off with a truck driver."

"And Celeste . . . ?"

"Same thing all over again," Alan said wearily. "Only that was when I promised her this thing about blondes. She'll break the engagement again and this time it'll stay broken. It's no way to treat a girl that's stuck by me the way Celeste has. So I'll have to get me another secretary. Preferably one with no hair," he ended sourly.

"No," H. C. said. "I promised Nancy that job as soon as she got out of business school. You'll have to develop a little strength of character."

"It's too late," Alan said, rising. "If that's your final answer, then get yourself another boy. I resign."

"You can't resign," H. C. said.

"The hell I can't," Alan said. "Why can't I?"

"It's in your contract," H. C. told him. "If you'd bothered to read that contract, instead of just signing it happily after a quick glance at the figures, you'd have learned that I've protected myself in the matter of my new manager. I can fire you, but you can't resign. If you do, I'll sue you for everything you've got—and get it."

"All right," Alan said grimly. "You're a stinking old goat, making promises to cute little blondes. Now go ahead—fire me!"

"Nope," H. C. said blandly. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names'll never hurt me. I won't fire you and you can't quit."

"Trapped!" Alan said bitterly. "And much good may your bargain do you!"

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"That sounds like a threat," H. C. said, and settled back to give an extended lecture. "Look, son, there's another clause in your contract that says I can cut that nice salary if you don't deliver."

"You can cut . . ." Alan began, outraged.

H. C. waved a well-manicured hand. "Shut up and listen," he said. "When I hired you away from Longmans, I knew what I was doing. You're good-looking and you have that diffident air that makes people think you're understating—so the clients trust you and business picks up for your firm. Now, I've been trying for five years to get old man Forbes signed up with us. He makes towels and sheets and stuff—it's a big account. A *big* account. I want it. His present advertising contract expires in a couple of weeks and you are to get him signed up with us. That's your job. That's why I hired you."

"I see," Alan said. "And after I go out and snag this account, you exercise your right to fire me, is that the deal?"

"Certainly not," H. C. said indignantly. "I don't do business that way. You'll be worth your salary any day in the week. You were worth that to Longmans, only they were too tight to pay it."

"And if I fail to get this Forbes account?" Alan inquired.

"You can get it," H. C. said comfortably. "I don't hire a man without looking into his record and I know you can get it. If you don't I'll have to conclude that you're not paying attention to your work, and in that case, according to the contract which you signed of your own free will, your salary gets cut. Drastically!"

Alan moved to the door. "So that's how you get to the top," he said. "Over the bowed and bleeding heads of your employees. Well, I'll see what I can do."

"And Nancy stays in your office," H. C. called after him.

"There are more ways of killing a cat then choking it on butter," Alan retorted.

"I'm warning you . . ." H. C. yelled, but Alan closed the door gently and went back to his own office. This called for a change in tactics and he'd better make it good.

NANCY WAS TYPING busily. He looked over her shoulder and observed a neat row of drill sentences.

"Just in case anyone came in," she explained. "I have to look busy, don't I? I wish you'd hurry up and find something to dictate. I'm really pretty good," she finished modestly.

Alan made a strangled noise. "Look, Miss Moran," he said.

"Nancy," she corrected him sweetly. "Let's not be so formal. After all, we're going to be rather closely associated."

"Not if I can help it," Alan said. "Why don't you go away? Can't you find another job?"

"I don't want another job," Nancy said. "I like this one."

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"I'm very hard to get along with," Alan said darkly. "I've been known to frame perfectly innocent people just to get rid of them."

"That wouldn't do you a bit of good," Nancy retorted. "Just put it out of your mind. Uncle Harvey wouldn't believe a word of it."

"Uncle?" Alan said, staring.

"Uncle," Nancy repeated smugly. "He wouldn't fire a member of his own family. He told me so."

Alan said, "Oh" and his voice had a hollow note. Then he said threateningly, "My fiancée doesn't like blondes."

"Fiancée?" Nancy's smile vanished, but only for a moment. "Pooh! I can lick my weight in fiancées any day!"

The situation certainly looked hopeless. Alan went into his beautiful private office to regroup his forces. He eyed the little bar, tempted, and then reflected that he would need all his wits about him. Because—he might as well admit it—he wasn't going to be able to work with Nancy around.

She was, in a word, beautiful. Admitting this Alan felt that familiar tightness in his chest—only this time it seemed to be much worse. It appeared to be accompanied by a chill, followed immediately by a sensation of luxurious warmth, phenomena hitherto unknown in his association with blondes. Something had to be done and quickly. He had to get going on that Forbes deal.

He couldn't fire her and he couldn't insult her. If she'd get married . . .

Married! Now that was a brilliant idea. Maybe he could arrange matters so that she would get married and no longer be out there to distract an honest, hard-working advertising man. But with only two weeks, he would have to work fast.

Alysse had gone for truck-drivers in a big way, but Nancy didn't seem quite the type, somehow. And Danielle had wanted money, but he didn't think H. C. Radford's niece would bother—not just for money. Why should she?

Charlie Ransom, now. Alan sat up straight and reached for the phone. Charlie was perfect. Why hadn't he thought of him immediately? He was from one of Burlingame's best families, not a millionaire yet but he was junior member of a good law firm and getting to the top fast. He was a fraternity brother, too, and had roomed right across the hall.

Alan got his line and dialed. After a preliminary skirmish with a few secretaries, he heard Charlie's voice. "Ransom speaking."

"Charlie, this is Alan. How's the law business?"

"Hello!" Charlie said. "Right on the beam, kid. How's the great Longmans?"

"Oh," Alan said carelessly, "I've quit them cold. I'm working for H. C. Radford now. Know him?"

"Do I!" Charlie said, sounding impressed. "That's pretty good. How come?"

"More money," Alan said briefly. When the time came, he would ask Charlie if that contract was legal, but not now. "They gave me a

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snazzy office, too. Come up and see it. Have lunch with me, huh?"

"Sure," Charlie said. "Around twelve? Oh-oh, here comes something that walks like a client. I'll see you, boy."

ALAN HUNG UP feeling almost satisfied. One look at Nancy and the lad would be hanging on the ropes. His doting mother had spiked one or two romances for him, but she couldn't object to H. C. Radford's niece.

And Charlie was a pretty good egg, when you came right down to it. Unfortunately he let his mother lead him around by the nose.

That mother of his would probably give Nancy a rough time. Alan felt a little pang of sympathy, thinking of Mrs. Ransom and her way with the girls Charlie had wanted to marry. How she would treat the one he finally married was anybody's guess.

Still, that was none of Alan Gaynor's affair. He hardened his heart and buzzed for his secretary.

Nancy came in beaming, notebook and pencils ready. She looked more efficient than any small blonde angel had a right to look. Maybe he'd better save his sympathy for Mamma Ransom.

It was ten-thirty when they started on the accumulated mass of work left by Alan's predecessor and they were still hard at it when various whistles announced that it was time for lunch. The dictation had gone well too. Alan had found that by placing Nancy's chair at the side of his desk, he didn't have to look at her and could concentrate on what he was doing. Almost, anyway.

"Well," he said, as he stood up, "that ought to keep you busy."

Nancy flipped the filled pages of her notebook. "A couple of hours," she said. "Maybe you can think of something else by then."

Alan watched her walk out of the room. Nice walk. Nice ankles, nice . . . Cut it out, Gaynor!

His buzzer sounded and he flicked the inter-com switch. "A Mr. Ransom is here," Nancy's voice informed him. "He says he's invited."

"Fine!" Alan said heartily. "Send him in."

The Marines have landed and have the situation well in hand, Alan thought. Charlie was supposed to be a fast worker. Within a week he ought to be taking enough of Nancy's time so a man could get some work done. That would leave a whole week to cinch the Forbes account.

The buzzer sounded again. "He doesn't want to go in there," Nancy told him. "He says he likes it out here."

Talk about fast work! "I'll be right there," Alan said quickly, and flipped the switch. Just then his phone rang.

It was Celeste. "Darling," she said, and there was a chilly edge in her voice, "I think you might have told me about your new job. I had to get the news from Father."

"I was going to call you," Alan said apologetically, "but it's been a little hectic around here."

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"A telephone call takes very little time," Celeste pointed out: "You might have shown more consideration. Come to dinner tonight and tell me about it."

"Tonight?" Alan said. "I can't, Celeste. I have to—uh—take a client to dinner. Listen, suppose I call you Monday, and we'll go out. You pick your favorite restaurant."

There was a small, cold silence, then Celeste said, "That sounds a little evasive, Alan, but I suppose you know best. Very well."

And she hung up. Alan took a deep breath, replaced the receiver, and eyed the telephone reproachfully. Oh, well . . .

When he finaly stepped into the outer office, Charlie was leaning on the corner of Nancy's desk exuding charm. Well, call it charm. Alan wondered why he had never noticed the way old Charlie showed all his teeth when he smiled.

"Well, we'd better get going, I guess," Alan said briskly, but Charlie didn't move.

"We'll have to wait while Nancy gets her coat," he said. "She's going to have lunch with us. I asked her."

Nancy said, "Well, if . . ." and then looked at Alan with suspicion dawning in her eyes. "Hm," she said.

"By all means," Alan said, and his smile revealed, he felt sure, as good a dental display as anybody's. After all, this set-up couldn't be more perfect. Off to a good start already.

"Your fiancée wouldn't mind?" Nancy murmured, as she went to get her coat.

Charlie said, "Of course Celeste wouldn't mind. How could she? You'll be my girl. Just ignore Alan." Nancy smiled at him brightly.

Alan looked at her thoughtfully. He didn't quite like the way that demure little dimple came and went in her left cheek.

LUNCH, FROM THE only sensible point of view, was a big success. There was no doubt that old Charlie was smitten. His attentions to Nancy bordered rather dangerously on the nauseating. And Nancy played up to him in a way that confirmed Alan's worst opinion of blondes. Even if Celeste walked in, she couldn't object. It was so evident that Nancy was Charlie Ransom's date.

Finally, telling himself he ought to give the lad a clear field, Alan excused himself. "Better see if there's anything doing at the office," he muttered. "Enjoy yourselves, kids. Those letters can wait."

He looked back once, while the cashier was counting out his change, and Charlie was about as close to Nancy as he could get without actually sitting in her lap.

Alan left rather quickly. In a week everything would be fine.

Week, nothing. The rate Charlie was progressing, the Gaynor troubles would be over by five o'clock.

Back at his office, he kicked one of the genuine leather chairs somewhat viciously and had a quick snort from the elegant little bar. A mistake, taken on top of a substantial lunch.

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He promptly developed a plain, old-fashioned stomach ache.

Just about the time he had decided to look for some bicarbonate of soda, his telephone rang. Alan picked up the receiver and said, irritably, "Hello?"

A small silence was his only reply, and then a deep, authoritative male voice said, "Is this Mr. Gaynor?"

"Yes," Alan admitted, and paused while a particularly unpleasant pain sliced across his middle from right to left. "Yes, it is."

"You don't sound very sure of it," the voice said drily. "This is Forbes."

"Forbes?" Alan repeated politely and glanced at his watch. They should have left the restaurant by now, surely. He massaged his middle tenderly and wondered where he'd heard this man's name.

"You mean you've never heard of me?" The voice named Forbes began to sound incredulous and perhaps slightly outraged.

"Of course I have," Alan said heartily.

"Well, then . . ." Mr. Forbes said, not quite modified—and just then the outer door of the office opened to admit Nancy, radiant and glowing, followed much too closely by an offensively beaming Ransom.

"Excuse me," Alan muttered into the chattering telephone. "Very busy. Call me back in an hour, will you?" He hung up, and, levering himself out of his chair, walked into the outer office.

He glanced pointedly at his watch and Nancy said gaily, "Oh, dear, it's late, isn't it? But we were talking, and it was so interesting . . ."

She took off her hat and coat and hung them in the closet, and came out fluffing her blonde hair. Alan stared hard at the golden halo, reminding himself firmly that he was, after all, trying to marry her off to old Charlie.

"We had a marvelous time," Nancy breathed and smiled at Charlie who was looking all red-faced and revolting.

"I'll have to go back and see if my office is still there," Charlie said. "I'll call you, Nancy. Be seeing you, Alan, and thanks."

Alan said, "Okay. Sure. Any time."

Hospitality was fine, but did she have to escort him clear to the elevator? Here it was, almost two o'clock.

HE WAS PACING the floor, his arms clasped across his stomach, when Nancy returned, seated herself demurely behind her typewriter, and looked at him—a level and somehow disturbing look.

"Old Charlie's a fine chap," he offered nervously.

"Chap!" Nancy said. "English, yet. Very fine," she added, "but it won't work, Alan."

"Mr. Gaynor," he said. Not that it mattered—not now. He'd be dead by morning anyway.

"Alan," she countered firmly. "And you needn't think you can get rid of me by throwing me to the wolves, either. And I do mean wolves!"

Alan stopped pacing, his jaw slightly unhinged. Nancy went on, her tone almost gentle. "I can read you like

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a book, Alan. A rather nice book, of course." She looked at him sharply. "What's the matter with you? You look positively green."

"I don't feel good," Alan muttered. "Maybe I'd better go home."

"And go to bed," Nancy ordered. "Call a doctor. I won't have you getting sick!"

In a matter of minutes he was on his way home. He eased his convertible with automatic skill through the tangle of mid-afternoon traffic and wondered what he could do, now that she'd seen through this scheme. The girl was uncanny—or was he so transparent?

Alan went to bed after taking everything he could remember that his mother had ever given him for a stomach ache. And that was how he missed the storm that broke over his office that afternoon.

He caught his share of it the next morning, however. He had hardly started on the morning's work, after assuring Nancy three times that he was all right, when his buzzer sounded.

"Uncle Harvey wants to see you," Nancy said, sounding worried.

"Okay," Alan said, wondering. He didn't have to wonder long.

"I understand that you had a telephone call yesterday afternoon," H. C. said.

"I suppose so," Alan said. "I wasn't feeling very good . . ."

"That's what Nancy tells me," H. C. broke in. "And that's the only reason your salary hasn't been cut clear to the bone, as of right now." He paused and took a deep breath, obviously controlling himself. "Forbes called me after you'd left."

"Forbes," Alan said, and then he remembered. "Great suffering catfish!" he breathed.

"Exactly," H. C. snapped. "It was fortunate that Nancy had already told me you were ill, so I could assure him that you were probably at death's door and didn't know what you were doing." Here his control broke. "The biggest account in town!" he roared. "And you hang up in his face!"

There was more of the same, but Alan hardly listened. A golden opportunity had landed right in his lap, and he had brushed it aside like—like so much dross, whatever dross was. All because Nancy had come in just that minute with Charlie Ransom. Well, he had brought it on himself.

"Blondes!" he muttered, and H. C. paused in his tirade and said, "Huh?"

Alan repeated the word with distaste. "I asked you to let me get another secretary," he said accusingly. "How can a man keep his mind on his work?"

THE ANGRY RED began to fade from H. C.'s face and he looked thoughtful. "She told me but I didn't get it," he murmured. "You were talking on the phone and hung up when she came in with Ransom."

"That's right," Alan said. "It's just like before, only worse. If I don't get another secretary, you'll never get the Forbes account."

"Can't keep your mind on your work?" H. C. asked, and if Alan

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hadn't known better, he would have sworn there was a twinkle now in those frosty blue eyes. "Well," he added loudly, "Nancy stays right there and you get that Forbes account! Though how you'll do it now, with two strikes against you, I don't know. That's up to you."

"It can't be done," Alan said shortly. "You're a hard man, H. C. You'd cut my salary because I don't do something that you yourself make it impossible for me to do."

He left then, right in the middle of H. C.'s protest, and went back to his own office.

Nancy greeted him anxiously. "What happened?" she demanded.

"Same old thing," he grunted. "If I don't get the Forbes account, he's going to cut my salary. Forbes called me yesterday . . ."

"Yes, I know," Nancy interrupted. "Uncle Harvey told me. Mr. Forbes called him and he was simply fit to be tied. I'll have to think of something else," she mused. "I'll call Mary right away."

"Something *else*?" Alan asked, a number of ideas clicking into place in his mind. "And who's Mary?"

"Mary Forbes," Nancy said absently. "Mr. Forbes' daughter. I went to school with her."

Well, at least one of his new crop of suspicions was confirmed. "And that's why he called me, instead of waiting for me to go to him?"

"Of course," Nancy said, as if that were obvious. "I mean, a cold-water flat is all right, Alan, if it's the best you can afford, but I much prefer your present salary. I don't want it cut."

"*You* don't. . ." Alan began, choking slightly. "Listen, I'm engaged. Remember?"

"For the time being, yes," Nancy said primly. "But I have asked around and I think you've been sold a bill of goods. One thing at a time, though. We'd better get Forbes out of the way first."

Alan fled into his own office and shut the door. So that was it! Well, no blonde was going to snare Alan Gaynor just like that. The brazen little female! The little . . .

He spent a few minutes groping for appropriate words, ignoring the pleasant glow that was stealing over him. He would get that Forbes account now, or die trying. He reached for the phone, just as his buzzer snarled at his elbow.

"I've fixed it," Nancy told him cheerfully. "I hope. We're having dinner with Mary and her father tonight. Seven o'clock at the Golden Swan."

"*You've* fixed it!" Alan yelled. "Listen, Nancy, who's running this, anyway?"

There was a brief silence, and then she said meekly, "You are, Alan. But what happened yesterday was my fault, in a way, so I called Mary and arranged this dinner date to give you another chance at Mr. Forbes. I thought it was the least I could do."

Women were unfair, Alan reflected morosely. A snippy Nancy he could cope with, but a meek and humble Nancy was too much for him. "Alan?"

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she said, and sounded almost as if she might cry. His next words were miles from what he had intended to say.

"It's all right, baby," he said. "I'll go."

He could hear her breath of relief. "Fine!" she said. "Pick me up about six. I live at Uncle Harvey's. That's down on the Peninsula."

"I know where it is," Alan said, and switched off quickly. He had been there a couple of times while this job was on the fire. But if he had known H. C. had a small blonde bundle of dynamite for a niece, he would never have gone near the place!

"Hooked!" he muttered, scowling at the correspondence on his desk. He had made a promise and look what had happened to it! Or would happen to it, if he didn't watch his step.

OKAY, SO HE had a date with her, and the way it had worked out seemed perfectly natural. But it would stop there. He would convince her that he was really in love with Celeste and she would be through with him. Probably marry Charlie Ransom—the bum.

No, that was unfair. He had brought old Charlie into it himself, with the sole idea of getting rid of Nancy. Be reasonable, Gaynor, he told himself sternly, and get to work!

He rang for Nancy and spent the rest of the morning dictating. That afternoon he went out to interview a prospective client and got the account with no trouble at all, and almost no expense. Just a couple of highballs. Now why, he asked himself scornfully, can't I get that Forbes account just as easily? The answer of course was that the Forbes account was jinxed—by a cute little blonde jinx.

He spent over an hour getting dressed for dinner.

Much later Alan sometimes wondered how he had managed to get the convertible back to San Francisco that evening with Nancy close beside him in something white and gold and fragrant. He did, though, and they were seated at their table when Forbes and his daughter arrived, accompanied by a sandy-haired youth who was, it became quickly evident, responsible for the big diamond on Mary's left hand.

Mary Forbes was a dark, pretty, mischievous little girl. Alan caught a look that passed between the two girls, and decided that they had probably, between them, made life pretty rough for the authorities of whatever school they had attended.

Then he was being introduced to John Forbes, a tall, lean man with shrewd dark eyes. He didn't seem as distant as he might have, either, under the circumstances, but that was easy to figure. Nancy to Mary to Forbes—the way the man looked at his daughter, anyone could tell she had him wrapped right around her little finger. Maybe this thing would work out all right, after all.

The dinner was excellent and the conversation general. No mention was made of advertising until coffee was served and Mary and her young

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man, whose name was Claude, had left the table to dance. Alan was about to ask Nancy to dance—after all, it would look pretty queer if he didn't, wouldn't it? But she got up and murmured something about fixing her face and left quickly. Giving him a chance—managing him, darn her!

Alan watched her until she vanished through a door across the room and then realized with a start that Forbes was talking.

"I beg your pardon?" he said, coming back to reality with a jolt.

Forbes took a deep breath and turned slightly red. "Why don't you marry the girl?" he snapped. "Then maybe you could tend to business!"

"I'm already engaged," Alan said. "To somebody else."

Forbes snorted contemptuously. "Mistakes can be remedied," he said. "So that's what ailed you yesterday when I phoned!"

"It was not!" Alan denied hastily, and then grinned sheepishly. " I had a stomach ache," he said, which was at least part of the truth. Forbes stared at him, then chuckled.

"The same thing happens to me when I eat shrimps. You wouldn't believe it. Absolute agony. What did you take?" he asked suddenly.

Alan told him and got a nod of approval. "The old-fashioned remedies are best," Forbes said, and it went on from there. They were arguing amiably over the best treatment for a cold, and Alan was deciding that he would actually like the guy if it weren't for this infernal contract, when Nancy came back to the table.

That was fine because Nancy was a beautiful vision and worthy of a man's exclusive attention. But she had picked up Charlie Ransom somewhere along the line and he evidently had the exclusive attention to give her.

"Mind if I dance with your date?" he asked, and without waiting for an answer, they moved off. They danced well together, too, Alan observed. He watched them weaving in and out among the dancers on the small floor and his thoughts were bitter. He wasn't even aware when Mr. Forbes stopped talking and leaned back with a resigned sigh.

When Nancy, carefully escorted by Charlie Ransom, started back toward the table, Alan got up hastily, murmured briefly at Mr. Forbes, and went to meet them.

"This little girl is a wonderful dancer!" Charlie enthused. Alan managed a dour smile.

"Let somebody judge that knows how to dance," he said, and, seizing Nancy's wrist, he led her back to the dance floor. Charlie looked after them for a moment, thoughtfully, then wandered off muttering something that sounded like "Judas!"

Charlie was right—she danced like a dream, like a feather in the breeze, like a falling rose-petal. What he should have done, Alan reflected, nestling his cheek against fragrant golden curls, was to run like sixty the minute he saw her. The minute she walked into his office and said,

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"Good morning, Mr. Gaynor," he should have leaped and run like a startled jackrabbit. Because now—a man might as well face the worst—now he was hopelessly in love with her.

He would have to keep her from finding it out, if he could. Because if she behaved like other blondes of his acquaintance, she would just laugh and Gaynor would get the old heave-ho. And this time would be worse than ever. It would be unbearable. Because this was Nancy. This was it—now and forever.

"Alan," a cold, familiar voice said at his elbow. He stopped and turned and there was Celeste, looking at Nancy with cold contempt on her patrician face. Why, confound the woman! Nobody could look at Nancy like that and get away with it!

Then Celeste shifted her icy glance to him and held out her hand. "Here's your ring," she said. "You have broken your promise, Alan, and this time I'm afraid it will be difficult to forgive you."

"This time," Alan said through his teeth, "you won't get a chance to forgive me!"

He led Nancy back to their table—and found that Mr. Forbes and his party had gone! Well, that was that. Things ought to start getting better, because they certainly couldn't get any worse. There would be a scene with his family, he would lose his job, and probably lose Nancy, too. Not that he had her yet, or any claim on her at all, but she was *there*. A man could certainly live without Celeste and families could be persuaded; a man could always get another job, too. But living without Nancy somewhere around was going to be rough.

It was after midnight when he parked the convertible once more in front of H. C. Radford's big house down on the Peninsula. The ride had been almost silent, what with one thing and another—chiefly the fact that Alan had answered Nancy's conversational efforts with unintelligible grunts.

Up the steps, across the veranda to the big front door. Alan took her key and opened the door for her politely. Say good night, mustn't touch her . . .

Returning her key, his hand brushed hers, just the faintest touch—but it was too much. Alan groaned, defeated, and swept her into his arms.

As a kiss, it was a shattering experience. After an interval that might have been one minute or ten, he released her and stumbled out to his car. He drove back to the City through a night grown unaccountably rosy and shot with stars. Thank heaven for one thing—he hadn't said anything. He had given her no chance to laugh at him. Not, that is, actually *said* anything—in words.

She had seemed to enjoy that kiss, too, he thought hopefully. One might say, in fact, that her cooperation had been whole-hearted and enthusiastic. Maybe Nancy was different. Maybe, nothing. Nancy was different from any other woman in the whole world!

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Alan was a little late getting to work the next morning. Nancy was there ahead of him, looking a little subdued, of all things.

"So there you are!" a voice behind him snarled. Alan jumped. It was the boss himself. Alan started to speak, but he didn't have a chance. "I hired you to get that Forbes account!" H. C. yelled. "He calls you and you hang up on him. You take him to dinner and then walk off and leave him sitting there while you dance. Nancy told me about it. No wonder he went home! He's probably already renewed his old contract. You —you . . ." Words finally failed him.

Alan said, "You can always fire me." But his heart wasn't in it. Besides, Nancy was sitting there twisting her hands and looking at the clock. Her esteemed uncle was making her nervous, and for two cents he'd bust the old guy in the nose.

And then the door swung open to admit Mary Forbes and no less than old John Forbes himself.

"Morning, H. C.," he said gruffly, and H. C. responded with a startled growl. Let them have it, Alan thought, and started for Nancy.

But he was too late. Mary and Nancy were clasped in a tender embrace, shedding tears and looking happy at the same time. Women!

" . . . fine young man," Forbes was saying. "Wonderful salesman. Uses catnip tea for a stomach ache. You don't find them like that very often. Well, where's that contract?"

Nancy blew her nose and snapped into action. "Right here," she said. "I just happen to have it right here in my desk." She produced a pair of neat legal-looking documents and a fountain pen, all in one motion, and in no time at all the thing was done. Forbes didn't even read it carefully —just glanced at the figures and signed.

"I'll expect some service on this, H. C.," Forbes growled. "Send that young man around—but not, for pity's sake, until after those kids are married."

"Married?" H. C., croaked, clutching his copy of the precious contract. "What's going on here?"

Nobody answered him, for the simple reason that Alan and Nancy were otherwise occupied.

After a while, Nancy murmured, "What about Celeste?"

Alan blew gently against her hair and said, "You were right—they sold me a bill of goods. You're the girl I've been looking for all my life."

"Listen!" H. C. said loudly. "Listen, Gaynor! You can't do that! Nobody asked *me* anything about getting married! Gaynor, you're fired!" But there was a twinkle in his eye.

"Nope," Alan said smugly. "You can't fire me now. I'm one of the family and you don't fire a member of your family. Nancy told me so."

Nancy said, "I made an appointment with Dr. Bronson for four this afternoon. We can get married Friday."

Alan blinked. "Won't you need time for a trousseau or something?"

Nancy grinned impishly. "I bought my trousseau the day I met you," she said. "After work." ♥ ♥ ♥

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Minx in Mink

by Winston Bouvé

Clothes make a woman—do very strange things.

JUDY CRESWELL WAS pale under the copper beauty of her hair. Her slim hands clenched the tea shop table as she incredulously watched the face of the man she loved.

How could he look so exactly the same after dealing her this monstrous hurt? How could his expressive hazel eyes beg for his freedom just as they had begged for that first kiss a year ago?

If he would only stop talking and let her escape with what was left of her pride! But being Eric, he simply had to justify himself.

"It isn't as if we'd actually been engaged, is it, Judy, darling?" he pleaded. "I told Emily that."

Her red mouth curled in the ghost of a smile.

"No, not at all," she assured him in a small, careful voice. "You can put Mrs. Follansbee's conscience at rest. From her point of view, we certainly weren't engaged. You never gave me a ring, and our wedding plans never reached the society columns."

She added with a hint of suppressed hysteria in her voice, "I'm glad you pointed that out. It makes me feel less jilted."

He had the grace to flush darkly.

"You don't mean to make it any easier for me, do you? Damn it, Judy, I'm not a complete heel! I never planned this. A man can get involved with a fascinating woman before he knows what's happening to him. I'm only human."

Fool, she told herself, not to have seen the way the wind was blowing, all spring, all summer long. Not to have guessed, from Eric's moodiness, from the dates he broke, the flimsy

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excuses he gave, that she had already lost him. But there is no one as credulous, just as there is no one as vulnerable, as a girl in love with a man she isn't sure of.

She hated him suddenly for his own fatuous self-deceit.

"No, you're not a heel, according to your own ideas," she told him. "You're just a life-size serenade to a wealthy widow."

She meant him to wince at that, and he did.

"You think, just because Emily is older than I am, that it's her money I'm after. I'll grant you this: her money is a big part of her charm—but I don't mean it the way you do." He paused, striving toward some sort of honesty.

"I mean that money gives any woman glamour and allure. It gives her the background, the stage setting for furs, jewels, perfect clothes, absolute self-confidence."

He ground out his cigarette savagely.

"These are the things most men fall for, and don't you kid yourself that they're not. Men like I, anyway, who were brought up to expect something besides grubbiness out of life and saw everything go overnight."

JUDY KNEW THAT Eric had been jerked out of an exclusive prep school by sudden family reverses, to face a frightening, workaday world. Now, years later, he was still that same sullen, resentful boy.

Knowing these things did not ease the dull ache in her that would soon grow to a living, gnawing torment. Weak and spoiled and shallow though he was, he had been hers and she loved him. But she mustn't think about it—not for a while anyway. She reached for her gloves, lifted her teacup and forced her lips into a smile.

"You know what you want, Eric. I hope you keep on wanting it. Here's to the larger life and a very happy marriage. I must be getting back to the office. I've some sketches to get out tonight."

She couldn't bear any more without breaking down, she knew. But Eric jumped up, barring her escape from the little booth.

"Not yet, Judy!" he implored. "Please! There's one thing more. Darling, you *will* understand, won't you?"

What now? Was it possible he was weakening in his resolve to marry Emily and her glamorous millions? As she trembled under the beloved, urgent grasp of his hand on her arm the frail hope guttered out. Shame-faced, incoherent as he was, he made his meaning perfectly clear.

"I don't quite know how to put this but—well, you know how jealous a woman can be, even of the past. If you've hung on to any of my silly scrawls—you wouldn't want to keep them, anyway and Emily . . ."

Something died inside of her then and there, as she looked at him and heard his mumbled words. So his precious Emily didn't want another girl to own love letters from him. It was almost funny.

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"Your letters. Of course," she said gently. "You'll have them all back in the morning's mail. I couldn't think at first what you meant. Thanks, Eric. Part of me might have kept on loving you if you hadn't said that. But you've set me free too, now. Good-by."

She left him standing there and walked out of the tearoom with quick, proud steps and her head held high.

It was after five. The handsome offices of the Gates-Gorham Advertising Agency were deserted except for the switchboard girl.

Judy went straight to her cubicle, hung up her smart jacket with careful, numb fingers and slipped into her ink-stained green smock.

Her drawing table was a litter of sketches and proofs—work she had left an hour earlier when she hurried to meet Eric.

Dry-eyed, she stared unseeingly at the clever, dashing drawings she had sketched for the new fur account Gates-Gorham had recently landed. It was a feather in her cap to have been handed this particular bit of art work, but it meant nothing to her now.

And she had told Eric that he had set her free. Liar! Oh, Eric, Eric . . .

ONLY THE ENTRANCE of the little blonde switchboard girl, ready to leave, kept the dam of her self-control from crumbling.

"There's something from Bergdoll-Blaine's to be signed for, Miss Creswell," she said. "I told the boy it should have gone on to the studios."

Judy frowned at the immense white and gold box that almost obscured the messenger boy.

What on earth? Oh, yes! It would be the fur stole Bergdoll's advertising manager had selected to be photographed in color for their new campaign. But what a stupid slip-up! It should have been delivered to the photographic studios the next morning, not here, tonight.

It couldn't be sent back to the store for that was closed. Four thousand dollars worth of mink was the last thing Judy wanted to be responsible for, but there was nothing else to be done. It would simply have to go in the vault until morning.

She undid the box, glimpsed the incredible richness of mink, the gleam of satin and signed the delivery book.

And then, alone at last, she gave way. Just to let go, to yield to the surging tumult of grief and loss, was an agonizing relief. At last, spent and shaken, Judy knew she had shed her last tear.

She lifted her wet, grief-stained face from the desk and snapped on a light. It was almost seven. Soon the cleaning women would be coming in. She must pull herself together, put the mink wrap in the vault for safe keeping and go home.

Home! What an empty, meaningless word now that Eric would never again stretch his graceful length in the wing chair before the fireplace, while she got dinner for two in her tiny kitchenette!

She had been so proud of learning

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to cook on a two-burner grill, of having made a cosy, lamplit haven out of a cramped, Village flat.

And all the time Eric had scorned every makeshift device, had curled his handsome upper lip at the little dinners served on a shaky card table. He had longed for Park Avenue apartments and the luxuriant life Emily Follansbee held out to him.

Judy ripped the tissue paper from the mink coat, the accompanying dinner dress of supple black satin, and the costly accessories. So this was the sort of thing that made a woman irresistible, was it?

Then her bitterness dissolved before the exquisite, caressing softness of the glorious pale pelts.

Before she knew it, she had slid into the beautifully worked stole and was standing before the mirror. It was true enough. The gleaming splendor of furs like this did do marvelous things to a girl. Judy, her bright hair disheveled, her face wan with grief, caught her breath at her own image in the glass.

On a still madder impulse, she let the most beautiful mink stole in New York slide from her slim shoulders and hurried to get out of her trim blouse and skirt.

THE DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE Mainbocher black satin might have been made for her. It clung to and subtly emphasized every curve of her body. Even the spike-heeled sandals with their glittering clasps fit her feet to snug perfection. And the inch-wide bracelet of simulated emeralds lent the final touch of sophisticated elegance.

When carefully applied make-up had completed the transformation from unimportant fashion artist to woman of the world, Judy smiled.

Eric was right! Clothes did matter terribly. They gave you poise and insolence and glamour; they made you sure of yourself and of your man. The loveliest office Cinderella in the world couldn't compete with a girl born to wear mink. But once disguised as a princess, who could tell the difference?

"Too bad there isn't any ball for you, Cinderella," she said out loud to her new self. "It would be worth a lot to test out Eric's worldly wisdom on some other man."

There wasn't any ball, but all Manhattan lay at her feet, a glittering pleasure ground of first nights and restaurants and dance places.

Suddenly, recklessly, Juy knew she wasn't going back to her West Thirteenth Street apartment. And her borrowed plumage wasn't going into the vault, either.

How long, Judy asked herself, toying with her frosted drink, could you convincingly wait in the cocktail lounge of the Mayfair Towers for a non-existent escort?

Alone and aloof and lovely, her sleek head poised arrogantly above the loosened richness of mink, she gave no sign of her inner qualms.

But the Judy inside that rich and breath-taking perfection was a panic-stricken mouse of a girl. The three-quarters of an hour she had dawdled

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here seemed a century. At first it had been rather fun, watching the beautifully dressed couples at the different tables. But as the dinner hour approached, they had thinned out and now the lounge was almost empty.

She wished, at the moment, that it had been emptier by one. A lone, extremely self-possessed young man whose deep tan set off his light hair and cool gray eyes had been eyeing her with definitely more than casual interest. Her poise was beginning to crumble.

It wasn't a come-hither look, either. It was curiously impersonal.

It made her speak sharply to the attentive waiter as she reached for the glittering evening bag that she carried by the courtesy of Bergdoll-Blaine.

"Nothing more, thank you. I shall not wait any longer for my friends."

The roll of bills she had thrust into the borrowed bag—most of her week's salary—looked pitifully meager against the satin lining. There would not be much left of it if she kept on with the absurd masquerade and played princess through dinner and the evening.

"I'm terribly afraid you don't even remember me," said a man's charming voice in her ear. "But I did want to remind you of that last dance we had at the Sylvester's June party, before they sailed."

THE WAITER was still hovering there like doom in black broadcloth. Judy smiled at the dark young man with stiff lips. How utterly outrageous! Well, she had asked for it, hadn't she?

"How nice of you to remember," she heard herself say. "But I'm appalling about people's names."

"Barry Drumm." His smile was wide and white and maddeningly naive. She could have killed him as he seated himself at her little table and kept the waiter with an authoritative nod. "Have you seen the Sylvesters this summer? Don't go, waiter. One more Scotch and soda for me, and a Martini for the lady."

There was nothing to do but acquiesce. In the Mayfair Towers, you just didn't flounce out magnificently.

"I haven't seen them since they sailed," she told him for the benefit of the waiter's back. And then she said with smothered fury, "I've never heard of the Sylvesters in my life and you know it. Your technique is excellent—and despicable! I could hardly commit both of us to anything as shoddy as a hotel pick-up. You knew that, and—and took advantage of it."

His wide, gay smile was gone. His gray eyes searched her small, distracted face with a sort of puzzled penitence.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said under his breath. "You're quite right. It was lousy of me. But it wasn't all a fake. I've been watching you for the past hour, trying my damnedest to recall where and when we met." He frowned down at the cigarette he ground out. "We have met, or at least seen each other, somewhere. Please! Do I look utterly unfamiliar?"

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Unwillingly she forced herself to look at him. Or perhaps it was his compelling eyes that drew hers like a magnet. He did look familiar, darn it! The name he had given her meant nothing. But then, she met and saw so many different people casually in her job.

A litte warning bell chimed in her brain. This lad has been concentrating on a lone lady in mink for the past hour. It happens all the time. He is just slicker than most of them.

And suddenly, with a ferocity that assured her that his charming impudence, his convincing contrition and his blunt good looks had nothing to do with it, Judy determined to give him rope enough.

"I was furious for a moment," she confided with sweet-eyed candor. "You'll admit it did seem a litte obvious and a woman staying alone in a New York hotel does have to be careful. But you're right. I've the queerest feeling that we have met somewhere, ages ago. You never knew my former husband, Forbes Cresswell, did you?"

That was gambit number two with a vengeance, Judy decided. She had forgiven all, placed herself as a rich, young, out-of-town widow, and delicatedly implied her loneliness, all in one charming breath. She would teach this fortune-seeking "Eric" a lesson.

He flashed his winning smile on her, and said gratefully:

"That's it, of course. Weren't you and he in Bermuda two years ago? Or could it have been Cannes, the next fall? I had just inherited a nice old boat from an uncle of mine, and you know how friends and friends of your friends turn up at every anchorage."

IT MUST HAVE been Bermuda," she said perfectly steadily. "We had a cottage there for two months. But I'm sure I don't remember being a guest on your boat. We must have met at the Yacht Club or at some hotel dance."

"Bermuda it was!" He went for the bait like a beautiful, over-eager trout.

"And to celebrate our meeting again, won't you dine with me?" he asked. "Please? It would make me feel that I really was forgiven."

She tapped on the table with slim, undecided fingers. It steeled her to feel his intent gaze upon the splendid, deceptive bauble on her left wrist. He was probably gauging its cost, but not within ten thousand dollars, she thought vindictively. Trust Bergdoll-Blaine not to send out any paste jewelry that betrayed its sham.

"I shouldn't," she said slowly. "But not for the reason you think." Her sudden smile was enchantment herself. "None of this would have happened, you see, if my delinquent swain hadn't stood me up for half an hour now."

Barry Drumm grinned at her with a small boy's impish, innocent charm.

"I could learn to love that lad," he reflected. "But on the whole, don't you think he needs a lesson?"

Judy picked up Bergdoll-Blaine's white lace evening gloves. They would have to be duplicated, the in-

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stant the shops opened, unfortunately!

"On the whole, I think he does," she admitted gravely. "I'm not even going to leave word at the desk for him."

That was the art of indirection for you, she thought with a sort of giddy triumph. Barry Drumm himself couldn't have bettered it. Let him be sure of his prospect. Any woman who lived at the Mayfair Towers must be worth his while.

He draped the stole over her shoulders as if she were a bit of Ming porcelain. But wasn't he moving a shade too rapidly? After all, it wasn't very wise to let his hands linger quite so long on the sleek, furred loveliness on her shoulders.

Or did the "Mrs. Forbes Creswells" of this world expect a very, very short cut indeed? She hated herself for a tingling, warm awareness as his fingers brushed the nape of her neck. He was a magnetic creature. But then, wasn't his appeal his stock in trade.

Then he spoke with a sort of dreamy reverence.

"What magnificent mink!" he said. "I've never seen more superbly matched skins."

The utter, breath-taking audacity of it! For an instant she felt as if she might either laugh or cry.

"I was mad about the stole the minute I saw it," she told him casually.

So he knew his mink as well as he thought he knew his women!

But for all that, as they sat at dinner his infernal charm got in its work. If she hadn't known him for the liar and fake he was, she would have sworn that here was a young man in the throes of a sudden, genuine infatuation.

His gray eyes, so clear, so beautifully set in his sunburnt face, were warm with sweet, unspoken things as they talked. Why did he look so familiar, every now and then? It was useless; she couldn't place him. She might have glimpsed him in some newsreel, or on a bus-top or subway. His charming concern for every small detail of her dinner, of her comfort and pleasure, was something she had never known before.

AND THEN SHE realized too, that she was comparing him to Eric. Eric who, when he took her out to dinner, always chose Italian restaurants because *he* liked the food; always ordered red wine because *he* liked it; always took for granted she would choose the cheapest entree because she would want to save him money—for Emily Follansbee's orchids!

She thrust away the bitter comparison in a sort of shocked horror. This wasn't the way to think of the man who has just broken your heart.

Because Barry Drumm was leaning across the table, imprisoning both her hands in his, saying, "I wish you weren't quite so lovely, Judy. Cres-well," she was letting that broken heart knit itself to new life and new pain, desecrating Eric's memory by comparing him to this professional fortune-hunter.

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Suddenly, she only wanted to punish this presumptious fool who was leading her out onto the dance floor. Punish him for her own bitter hurt, in whatever way she could.

Perhaps he was really taken with her. Then she could lead him on until she was ready to shatter his illusions.

More likely though, he was playing the role of love at first sight to a mink stole and an emerald bracelet. A few weeks of letting him squire her around the town, counting on all the rich rewards, and then she would take a bitter delight from letting him in on the lovely jest.

"You're a funny, sweet little girl, Judy, for all your grandeur," he murmured against her coppery hair. "And completely unpredictable. Just a minute ago you decided to hate me again, didn't you? Don't bother. My forebears came from Vermont, and I've a streak of granite a yard wide, honestly come by."

"So?" She gave him her most shining look. "Don't be obscure, Barry. You're not telling me you can't be hurt, are you?"

"Let's say impervious to rebuffs. It's a very stubborn, steadfast sort of thing, granite." His voice changed; the smile left his mouth. "You know, Judy, that I love you. I felt it when I first saw you in the cocktail lounge. Being with you, holding you, just proves to me that you belong to me. It must have started in the 'long ago' when we first met."

For a moment she almost forgot her plans. Her heart beat rapidly.

"We're both a little mad," she told him faintly. "Barry, please, you're saying so much more than you can possibly mean."

"I'm saying so much more than you believe," he corrected. "But you're going to believe it, and we're going to be a lot madder. Let's get out of here!"

They had stopped dancing in the middle of the floor, unaware of dancers and waiters and musicians. And as the lights dimmed, he bent his fair head and took her mouth in a sweet, timeless kiss that sent her straight to heaven and back again.

THEY WERE BACK at their table, and Judy was trying to arrange her mink stole, looking like a girl who has just been kissed into a state of trance.

Barry, reaching for the check, was saying, "It's a lovely night, Judy. I think we'll rent a hansom outside the Plaza and drive about the park. Would you like that?"

He knew, with beautiful perception, she thought, how shaken she was. And with perfect tact, he talked on as he glanced over the very large check.

"Have you noticed the lady in diamonds at the next table? She'll go on to some night club one fine evening, be spotted by the finger man of a jewel mob and good-by pretties."

Judy, having taken in the very dazzling lady, was busy fixing her make-up. It wasn't until afterwards that she remembered the mirrored face it reflected. A suave, sleekly

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barbered dark face with a scar lifting one eyebrow. And then she forgot everything at Barry's incredulous, convincing:

"Just a minute, waiter. Oh, hell! I must have left it on the dresser."

She knew, with a sickening, thudding impact just what his half mirthful, half annoyed words referred to. Knew before he rumpled his fair hair in little boy chagrin and said:

"Men who forget their wallets ought to be forced to subscribe to a memory course, at the first offense. Bring me a blank check, waiter."

He scowled with humorous resentment at two or three small, crumpled bills he had fished out of his trouser pockets. Judy caught her breath and said:

"No! Don't be absurd, Barry! I won't let you. Here." She opened her glittering evening pouch, thrust a roll of bills at him. "*Take* it, I say!"

He looked at her strangely as the waiter hovered uncertainly between them. She had gone very pale under her make-up. For just now, as he rumpled his sun bleached hair, she remembered where she had seen him before.

It had been six months ago in the photographic studios the Gates-Gorham Agency used. Barry Drumm, handsome in shorts and a blazer, had been posing, not too successfully, with a blonde girl model on simulated sand.

Why, she asked herself numbly, was she trying to save this despicable male model from the consequences of his folly? Why was she letting the waiter walk off with her hard earned salary, to keep Barry Drumm from signing a blank check he couldn't hope to make good?

Was it because of his practiced love making and the genuine answering passion it had evoked in her for one burning moment?, Or because, they were tarred with the same brush?

Agonizing shame engulfed her. He was a liar and a cheat. He would have given a bad check in a minute, counting on her to make it good later. But wasn't she, Judy Creswell, in her borrowed finery, just as dishonest?

"That was sweet of you, Judy," he said. "But why on earth . . ."

"They might have made trouble about the check," she said faintly. "Let's go. It's stifling in here."

He stared at her for a long moment, then said, "I see."

SHE DIDN'T WANT to prolong the anguish of pretense but she was too emotionally spent to protest when he helped her into a musty hansom at the edge of Central Park and told the grizzled cabbie to drive them about five dollars' worth.

"We can still manage that," he told her. An amazing light-heartedness had taken the place of the strained intensity of his former mood. "I lifted twenty-five dollars from you for that dinner, Judy. I'll give it to you at lunch tomorrow. But now . . ."

His arms were about her, his hand tilting up her chin. And suddenly, she ceased to struggle and gave herself up to the blessed anodyne of not thinking—just feeling, with every

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clamorous pulse in her. For this would be the end. There would be no tomorrows for them, nothing more than this little, brief taste of heaven.

"My darling," he said huskily against her cheek.

"You're crying, Judy, my sweet little goose. Everything's going to be all right."

The hansom swerved in its jog-trot and jolted to a stop against the shoulder of the drive as a long, dark car that had been idling behind came up alongside, spilling out three lean, dark men.

The coachman was jerked from his perch. Judy, utterly dazed, found herself staring into the ugly black snout of a gun. The face above it had been watching her in the mirror of her vanity back in the restaurant!

"Keep your chicken feed, pal," the man with the scar said to Barry. "We want the lady's fur and that bracelet. Better make it snappy."

Four thousand dollars worth of mink that Judy had no right to be wearing! Give it up to them? Never! And Barry—why did he sit there quiescent? *Why?*

She struggled as the second man reached into the cab and tore the coat roughly from her shoulders. She started to scream.

"Be still, you little fool!" Barry said to her roughly. "They mean business, Judy."

The gun was aimed at them both, of course. And now, the stole having been tossed into the car, the second man was wrenching her wrist cruelly, trying to unclasp the bracelet.

"Stop that," Barry said. "You're hurting her. Here."

Coolly, he found the spring clasp and tossed the bauble to the floor of the hansom. Suddenly, everything became clear to Judy.

"So that's it! You're not even a fortune-hunter. You're the finger man for this gang. Oh, I'm not afraid of being shot."

She screamed again before he clapped a hand across her mouth. Then things happened so fast it was like a kaleidoscopic nightmare. A snarl of command came from the leader. Deliberately, with all the force in his lean muscular body, Barry's fist shot out, struck her on the point of the chin and sent her sagging senseless to the floor of the cab as a shot roared out. Mercifully, that was all she knew.

AN INFINITY LATER, someone was holding something sharp and pungent under her nostrils. She opened her throbbing eyelids on an unfamiliar scene. It was the front room of a station house and half dozen blue coated men were grouped about her solicitously. She was stretched out on a very hard bench, half lying against a shoulder that seemed very comfortable.

A familiar voice was saying incredible things, as the buzzing in her head cleared, and she stared up. It was Barry's voice!

". . . and that's all I can tell you, Lieutenant. We're well insured, of course."

She struggled up. It was Barry she

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was leaning against; Barry who bent over her now, dabbing at her bruised and swollen jaw with the most gentle touch in the world.

"Feeling better, my poor precious?" he asked. "I didn't mean to knock you out so completely, sweet, but it was that or something a lot worse."

She glared at him and managed to gasp out, "But the coat, officer! This man . . ."

Her voice died away in a sob. Could she, even now, give away his part in the horrible, shameful night's work and send him where he belonged?

One of the policemen was asking her something. Barry interposed with the audacity of fondling her small, clenched hand as he spoke.

"My fiancée, Miss Creswell, is suffering far too much from shock and my over-zealous crack to be questioned tonight, officer. You have her officer address and the number on West Thirteenth Street."

Which one of them was mad, Judy asked herself? He knew? But how did he dare . . .

"After all, the stole is my responsibility, my loss. The bracelet is merely paste, as I told you. And as I am Bergdoll-Blaine's . . ."

"Yes," said the lieutenant, "it's your hard luck, all right, Mr. Drummond. But I guess you can stand it, insured or not."

Judy stared at him, stricken. Not Barry Drumm, but Barth Drummond, the young millionaire, usually absentee owner of perhaps the greatest furriers of Paris and New York.

She could have kissed him, and then she could have slapped him. How dared he pick her up tonight and let her play the rich young widow? How dared he let her in for this last humiliation?

But his smile was still the sweetest thing in the world and his arm about her was heaven, even if it was just part of an act to keep her in the clear.

"And now we're heading for Thirteenth Street," he told her. "Lieutenant, lend me taxi-fare until the morning, will you? It's pretty late to get a check cashed . . ." His eyes twinkled at her.

Speechless, she huddled in one corner of the cab bearing them south until he drew her comfortably into his arms.

"Don't!" she said. "Don't make it any harder for me, Barry Drumm! I—oh, thank you for protecting me as you did but you've got to listen. About why I was wearing your fur stole."

HE WIPED AWAY the tears that rolled down her cheeks with his handkerchief as she told him the silly, fantastic story. Of Eric, lost to Emily Follansbee, of her misery, her hurt pride, her reckless determination to wear mink once.

"If I lose my job at the agency I can get another one," she told him. "I am good at my stuff. And if it takes me my whole life, I'll pay for your lovely stole. But I still don't know why you protected me as you did."

"Why I protected you? Judy, darling, there in the restaurant, you were

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perfectly sure that I was a fortune-hunter or worse. Oh, you're a transparent thing, my girl! But you were afraid I was going to get into trouble, giving them a check and so you gave me the last cent you had.

"But that isn't the real reason. Six months ago, the day before I sailed for Europe, I went to the Acme studios, with our advertising man. I filled in for a model in some fool outdoor scene. While there I saw a girl with the loveliest red hair in the world and a charcoal smudge on her nose, doing some sketches. She'd gone before I got through, but I found out who she was. That girl went with me to Paris and London and Rome. She was with me night and day, Judy, smudge on her nose and paint-stained smock and all."

"I looked perfectly awful!" Judy breathed.

"And this evening—I only got in two days ago, on the *Queen Mary*—I was planning how to get myself introduced, when I saw her sitting opposite me in a cocktail lounge, done up in clothes I also recognized."

He grinned at her.

"It was something of a shock at first. But subconsciously, I knew she was all right, just as I knew a lot of other things."

Breathless with contentment, protected now by the circle of his arms, she asked, "Why did you pretend not to know me?"

He laughed softly. "Could I remind a lady wearing four thousand dollars worth of mink that I knew she was a working girl? And furthermore that it was my own mink?"

"Oh, dear!" She sighed, and went on in a self-conscious attempt to postpone the inevitable. "You shouldn't have told that officer we were engaged, though. Tonight has been fantastic. When we wake up tomorrow it will seem like a dream."

"You'll wake up tomorrow more engaged than you've ever been in your life, darling," he told her firmly. "Remember that conservative, rock-ribbed Vermont streak in me, Judy. If you think you're not going to make an honest man of me, after that ride in the Park, you're mistaken."

"You're sure, Barry? Very, very sure? It isn't just—glamour?" she asked.

He looked at her judiciously. "No, darling. You're not wearing mink. Your cheek is smudged again. And that wallop I landed on your chin is no beauty patch." He kissed it, his voice shaking a little. "But you're just what you were to me that day I first saw you. The most beautiful and dear and precious thing I've ever met."

Their lips met and clung.

"I'm glad," said Judy breathlessly, "that it's more than mink."

The taxi-driver turned around at last.

"We been parked here fifteen minutes, folks. Buy the cab if you want to but you're home."

Judy didn't even look at her own doorway, familiar in the pale pink dawn.

"Yes, I know I'm home." she said. And Barry understood. ♥ ♥ ♥

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Impatient Scholar

Thanks to your instruction, my dear,
I am wise in each athletic sphere;

I learn from you, wherever we go,
Facts I'm simply enchanted to know.

But I'll be glad when you propose
So I can discard my wide-eyed pose

Of eager, trusting deference,
And display some signs of intelligence!

—*May Richstone*

For Dog-Lovers Only

Every day I saw him
Striding down the lane,
Going for a walk
With a sleek Great Dane.

(He himself was sort of
The Great Dane type,
But he wore the nicest tweeds,
And he smoked the biggest pipe!)

So I took my cocker spaniel
For an airing, too;
And the Dane wagged his tail
And said, "How-do-you-do!"

And now every day
In all sorts of weather,
Here all four of us
Take a walk together.

The young man and I,
The cocker and the Dane,
And we all live together
In a cottage in the lane.

—*Carol Hunt*

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Kit was on a quest for the root of all evil—money.

Treasure Hunt

by Vina Lawrence

KIT TOWNLEY TOOK two suitcases full of new clothes and a new lipstick, and set out to catch a millionaire.

She had waited two years for this chance, and now here it was. It just went to prove that the school books were right. If you worked hard enough and long enough for anything, you got it. She had worked for this chance and here it was.

For two years, since Kit was seventeen, she had meant to marry a millionaire. She had spent those seventeen years being poor in a little New England town, and she had decided that being rich would be a nice change and not an impossible one, since she had rich auburn hair, wide blue eyes, flecked with yellow, and a figure that could practically block traffic in Times Square.

At seventeen, she had come to New York with definite plans. First she took a good stenographic course; then she waited until she had a chance at a job in Wall Street, just as a typist at first, but later as a stenographer to a wealthy broker.

She figured if she worked for a millionaire, eventually she would meet other millionaires, and she was right because now her chance had come. Her boss, Barns Nucomb, who was married and old and crabby, was going on a yachting trip and needed a stenographer to go along.

On the yacht there would be other millionaires, and undoubtedly some of them would be neither married nor old nor crabby.

So with a deep breath, two suitcases full of new clothes and a bright new lipstick, Kit walked aboard the

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yacht, quite aware that every male on the dock and on the boat was staring at her long shining legs and her lovely figure in the green and white dress. Her auburn hair was gleaming in the sun and her blue eyes were sparkling.

She was so busy holding her tilted nose sedately in the air in a bored manner so no one could guess that she had never been on a boat before, that she stumbled. She stepped from the gangplank onto the boat and fell headlong into the arms of a grinning young man in blue slacks.

"Well, what have I ever done to deserve this?" the young man asked as he held her tight in his arms.

KIT BLUSHED PAINFULLY even though the young man's arms felt very strong and warm and comforting. She stared up at him and saw that he was just one of the workmen on the boat. His slacks and shirt were soiled with engine grease, and there was a streak of black across his tanned face.

It did not matter that he had laughing hazel eyes, a tumble of sandy curls, and broad shoulders. Kit gave him an icy stare—the special stare that she gave all men who weren't millionaires.

"I beg your pardon," she said as coolly as she could, considering that she was still held tight in his arms, "Is Mr. Nucomb on board yet? I'm his secretary. Please carry my suitcases to my cabin."

He let her go and grinned down at her. "I beg your pardon," he said. "No, Mr. Nucomb and the rest of his party haven't arrived yet. This way, please."

He picked up her suitcases and led her through the great gleaming mahogany and ivory yacht, down steps to a small cabin. She kept her nose high because she didn't want to have anything to do with any of the sailors on the boat, and she didn't want this particular young man to think she was interested. Still, she couldn't help noticing how extra broad his shoulders were, and how brown and gay he looked, and with what a swagger he walked.

He put the suitcases down in her cabin and grinned at her. Graciously she handed him a quarter tip. He took it, still grinning and Kit smiled at him. She couldn't help herself.

"Would you like to see the engine room?" he asked.

She hesitated. Well, why not? The rest of the crowd had not arrived. They were probably having cocktails up at Mr. Nucomb's Long Island estate. She might as well have a look around. Anyway, this sailor might be able to tell her who was going to be in the party.

"Okay," she said and walked along beside him up to the deck.

He showed her about the deck first, and they climbed up to the boat deck together and sat down to rest on a pile of whitewashed rope. He was still grinning at her, and she couldn't look at him without feeling a warm glow clear down to her toes.

"You are awfully cute," he said.

She gave him her cold stare and he grinned wider.

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I KNOW I'M JUST dirt under your feet," he said. "I practically don't exist. I'm change from a bad penny. I'm a cipher with a hole in it. In other words, I'm not in your class at all."

She went red quickly. "Oh, I didn't mean it that way," she said, sudden tears in her blue eyes. "But you see, I've had certain plans for years and I just don't encourage anyone who doesn't fit into those plans. I mean, when a girl encourages a man, you never know what will happen next. There might be a moon and a little music and then she would be living in a walk-up flat somewhere cooking cabbage and wearing stockings from the ten-cent store. It pays a girl to be careful."

"You don't make a lot of sense," he said, "but I think I catch on in a vague way. You mean you don't care for cabbage and stockings from the ten-cent store, not even if they were offered in the same package with a guy like me."

"Not even if they were!" she said fervently.

He looked up at the blue sky and sighed, loud and long. "That," he said, "was my ego after you stuck the pin in it. I'd always thought my broad shoulders and perfect profile were all that was necessary."

"They do look nice," she said comfortingly, "but a girl has to think of other things."

"What, for instance?" he asked. "Exactly what?"

She looked about at the beautiful luxurious yacht. "Well, yachts."

"I see. A yacht for two is your idea of a future."

"With a few diamonds and a lot of evening gowns and a personal maid and a few little things tucked in," she said breathlessly.

"Nothing short of a multi-millionaire would do, huh?"

"I might take just a plain ordinary, garden variety millionaire, if he were nice," she said, smiling at him frankly, forgetting that he was just a sailor for the moment. "By the way, who will be on the boat? Do you know?"

"Several garden variety types, no doubt," he said dryly. "Now shall we look at the engine room?"

She took his arm as they went down the narrow companionway to the engine room. Several men looked up and one called:

"Thanks for helping us, Mr. Nucomb. I think you pointed out the trouble. I'll take back what I've said about you Harvard boys. Your Uncle Barns will be proud to know that you learned something practical in that engineering course."

KIT STOOD very still while understanding brought the blood to her face in a quick tide. She turned to the grinning man at her side.

"Then you are—but you can't be . . ."

He said suddenly, soberly, "I'm Terry Nucomb, Barns' nephew. I'm sorry I let you think . . ."

But she didn't stay to hear any more. She turned and rushed back up the companionway, blinded by em-

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barrassed tears. Barns Nucomb's nephew, and she had given him a quarter tip! She had told him that she was after a millionaire! Oh, how could she stay on the boat? How could she ever face him again?

He caught up with her on the deck as she ran toward her cabin and stopped her, a furious, little red-head with tears on her cheeks. His hazel eyes were soft, his face anxious.

"Look here, now, you aren't angry, are you? Wait!"

"You had no right to let me believe that you were a workman. You deliberately led me on! Oh, I hate you! I wish I might never see you again."

His face went slowly red, and his hand tightened on her arm.

"You smug little gold-digger, what difference does it make whether I'm a workman or not? You're mad at me because I know the truth about you. Well, let me tell you something. I knew the truth about you before you ever opened your mouth. I knew you were a little gold-digger the minute I saw you, all dressed fit to kill, with your nose in the air."

Kit's right hand flew out and slapped him, a resounding whack on the cheek.

With his lips compressed, he glared at her. Then he caught her in his arms and kissed her.

It was a kiss that was about as sweet and tender as a hurricane, about as loving as an active volcano. It was savage and thrilling and devastating, that kiss. It was filled with all his scorn and all his hatred for smug little phonies, but it was filled with something else, too. Something that sang its way through Kit's blood and landed, like an arrow, in her heart.

He let her go and they stood facing each other, their grim eyes blazing.

"I hate you!" she said between clenched teeth. "Don't dare to speak to me for the rest of this trip!"

He grinned suddenly. "There'll be other millionaires aboard," he said. "Don't take my loss so hard."

She whirled about and went to her cabin, and there she stared at herself in the mirror. Yes, she was pretty much dressed to kill in that new green and white sports outfit, brief and figure revealing. Everything about her was brand new and looked it. She knew suddenly, before she saw them, that the other girls, Terry's friends, would come on board in old slacks and casual sweaters.

Kit fell on the bunk and began sobbing, hard, bitter sobs. She had worked so hard for this chance, and now she had muffed it. She would never, never meet another millionaire like Terry. Never!

By the time she heard the others come on board and the yacht was moving out to sea, she began to feel better. After all, there were others on board. After all, she was beautiful.

She dressed, more casually this time, in a green slack outfit, and tied a handkerchief about her curls. She was looking very beautiful as she

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went up on the deck and met the rest of the crowd. There were nearly a dozen on board. A lovely, aristocratic looking girl, named Veree Vanson seemed to have charge of Terry. There was a woman whom someone said was an ex-countess, and a half dozen men.

Kit sat down in a deck chair and accepted the cocktail a man named Nat gave her. He was a lean, dark man, and he sat down beside her and began flirting with her. He seemed awfully nice and Kit was enjoying him when Terry passed by and whistled:

I can't give you anything but love, baby . . .

Nat went to get another cocktail, and Terry came over, saying out of the side of his mouth:

"Bad fishing there, beautiful. Nat hasn't a red cent."

"Will you leave me alone?" she asked.

He grinned. "Why should I?" he asked.

At dinner she sat by a man who seemed interested—a gay middle-aged man who was definitely making a play for Kit. During the fish course, the waiter gave Kit a note, scribbled in pencil:

You are wasting your time. He's married and has three children.

TURNING RED, Kit looked down the table and met Terry's gay eyes. She gave him a freezing look, but he only grinned.

Later, as they danced out on the moonlit deck, Kit found herself being rushed by yet another man—a man who was rather nice looking and very attentive.

Terry cut in and danced her over to the rail.

"That was Nelson Davis. Don't let him hand you a line. He's divorced but living on a settlement his wife gave him."

She looked up at him in the moonlight and gave him the nastiest look she could. She could have made it nastier if he hadn't been quite so handsome, brown and big, with the moonlight pouring like gold on his hair and his eyes twinkling.

"I'll thank you to let me alone!" she said.

"I'm just trying to be helpful."

"You're just trying to make me commit murder," she said.

"Don't be like that. It is such a beautiful night for landing a millionaire if you just pick out the right one."

It was a beautiful night—purple sky and gold moon and silver streaked water. A beautiful night, but Kit couldn't see it for the tears of rage in her eyes.

"Oh, Terry, darling, this is my dance, isn't it?" Veree called.

She came up to them, a gorgeous blonde girl, willowy and subtly well bred. She made Kit feel more awkward than ever. Terry turned and took Veree in his arms and danced away from Kit. She felt suddenly chilled and unhappy. The trip was ruined before it had begun.

She went into the cocktail lounge and sat down at the bar, wishing she

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had stayed at home. She saw her reflection in the mirror above the bar, a small red-headed girl in green slacks. She hoped they would dress for dinner tomorrow night so that she could get a chance to wear one of her evening dresses. Surely there must be someone interesting on board.

As if in answer to her thought, Terry appeared with a fat, bald, middle-aged man whom he introduced as Karl Branch. Karl eyed Kit with interested green eyes.

"Karl and I are the only really eligible men on board," Terry said laughingly, but his eyes were filled with wicked meaning. "You'll have to choose between us."

KIT HAD barely acknowledged the introduction, when the ex-countess came up and claimed Karl, leaving Kit and Terry facing each other.

"If you don't let me alone . . ." Kit began furiously.

"Wait, now, that's the truth. Karl is a multi-millionaire and a widower and very susceptible. He is the only man on board except me who is really marrying material. I thought you would like to know. Of course, I'm out."

"Out?" she cried. "I wouldn't marry you if I never got married!"

He picked up a cocktail and grinned at her over the glass.

"Don't be silly," he said. "You'd jump at a chance to marry me. I'm just what you've always wanted. I'm young, handsome, and wealthy."

This was so true that Kit was more furious than ever. She caught her breath, trying to think of something really biting.

"Don't worry," he said, "I wouldn't ask you to marry me if you were the last girl on earth."

"You smug, conceited, egostistical, impossible . . ."

"And I think you are a cheap little gold-digger without a brain, so that makes us even," he said. He put down the cocktail glass. "Well, that should about clear the atmosphere. Now suppose we start all over."

She stared at him, too dazed to understand. He drew her down on the stool beside him and explained.

"Do you realize that there are only two girls on this boat, you and Veree? Veree and I have known each other since kindergarten days, so of course we bore each other to death. That leaves only you. We'll be on this cruise for a week, and if you and I aren't on speaking terms it'll be just too bad, because I've proved to you that I'm the only interesting man around."

"But I don't like you," she flared.

"I know we can't stand each other, but at least we won't be bored. Can't we just call a truce for this week?"

"Well—but I never want to see you after I get off this boat."

"You certainly won't have to worry about that. Come on and let's dance. We can fight as well dancing as sitting still."

SO THEY went back on deck and began dancing in the moonlight. Suddenly the whole world changed. The week ahead looked like an eter-

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nity of golden days and silver nights, days and nights when she would be with Terry. Fighting or dancing, working or playing, it didn't matter as long as she was with Terry.

There were deck games with Terry, when she was conscious of his eyes watching her. She waited for the moments when they looked deep into each other's hearts and saw the shining thoughts that could not be spoken. Deck games were played with silly balls and funny sticks and marked numbers. Games? No, they were the first verse of the wordless song.

Kit never knew what the games were about, nor who won. She just knew that when Terry's hand touched hers and when his eyes met hers, the sun shone like gold on his sandy head.

She walked around the deck with Terry. She fished with Terry. She sat in the lounge and talked about life with Terry. And so three wonderful days passed.

He kissed her that third night. The moon, as if it had never really shone before and never expected to shine again, was pouring a flood of silver over the purple water. It was definitely a night for being kissed.

Kit and Terry stood on the upper deck and stared out at the tip of Long Island that was a dark blur to the right. They stood very close together and leaned against the rail.

"This is just the middle of the trip," he said. "We've been out three days and we'll be out three more days. Do you think you can stand me for that much longer?"

Kit swallowed the painful lump in her throat. She knew that she could stand Terry three eternities with a few eons thrown in. She hoped that the three days would last forever. But a girl can't say a thing like that, when a man keeps treating her as if she were a necessary nuisance—something to play around with just until he could get back to civilization and more interesting girls.

"I'll try to stand you," she said.

She looked up at him and smiled. Her lips were warm and full with invitation that brooked no refusal.

HE CAUGHT her close and kissed her, his firm young mouth holding hers hard and long, until the moonlight turned into a flame, enveloping them, welding them together. He kissed her again and again, adding fuel to the fire that had burst up between them.

Then he let he go suddenly.

"Damn!" he said. "It's no use."

She clung to the rail, trembling, knowing what he meant, praying in her heart that he would change his mind.

"It might be," she said chokingly.

"No, it couldn't be," he said. "I'd always know you married me because I was rich. I'll always know that any other presentable millionaire would have done as well. And I'd always know, too, that no other girl would ever do for me because—well, because you're the only girl I'll ever love."

He looked at her, his hands clenched tight on the rail, his face drawn and pale in the moonlight.

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She didn't answer him. She couldn't.

"That makes it pretty tough on both of us, doesn't it?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, "especially since no other millionaire will ever do at all."

And then he was kissing her again, kissing her in a way that made all the other kisses fade into nothingness.

"I've been mad about you since that first minute when you tilted your silly little nose at me," he said. "I'll never be sure you love me but I'm going to take the chance. I'm going to marry you, darling. Aren't you glad?"

"Oh, Terry," was all she could say. "Oh, Terry, darling!"

THE NEXT morning, while Kit was in Barns Nucomb's office taking dictation, he stopped in the middle of a letter and said abruptly:

"Terry is going to marry Veree Vanson. Both families have agreed on that. Terry is very fond of her, too. I might add that if Terry marries anyone else, I'll cut him off without a cent. You know that I say only what I mean."

He looked at Kit over his glasses and Kit recognized that look. She went quite white. He meant that if Terry married Kit, Terry, who had always had everything he wanted, who had always done everything he wanted, would be penniless. Why, Terry wouldn't know how to cope with a future without money!

I can't mess up his life that way, she thought to herself when she was back in her cabin. I love him too much to do that. I'll back out now before he loves me too much, before I love him any more. Maybe, there is still a chance of having a piece of my heart intact.

So she got out the only way she knew. She began flirting with Karl Branch, the multi-millionaire. It wasn't hard, for Karl had been interested in her all during the trip. Nothing was hard except the incredulous, pleading, hurt look in Terry's eyes.

"What's the idea?" he asked as soon as he could get her alone. She looked at him and smiled, making her smile haughty, making her eyes defiant.

"Barns told me something that changes things a bit," she said lightly. "He told me he would disinherit you if you didn't marry Veree. I'm not looking for a penniless husband, darling, so it's hello and good-by."

He went perfectly white, then he smiled unsteadily.

"Okay," he said harshly. "It's good-by, Kit. Better luck next time!"

FOR THE next three days Kit flirted like mad with Karl. She flirted with him to keep from thinking, to keep from going to Terry and throwing herself in his arms, to keep from noticing that Terry and Veree were making a charming two-some.

She flirted and danced and played with Karl until he was flattered and enthralled; until she had a multi-millionaire around her finger like a string.

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Then right out of a clear sky, that last evening on the boat, Karl proposed.

"I want to marry you, Kit. When?" he said.

She looked at him and laughed, laughed bitterly and shrilly because here was Karl offering her everything she had ever thought she wanted. Yachts and houses and clothes and jewels and servants and travel. Everything except the one thing she wanted, the one thing she knew she must have—Terry.

"I'm sorry, Karl," she said. "I'm awfully sorry."

Then she ran to her cabin and shut herself in. She threw herself down on the bunk and spent two hours crying.

It was after midnight when there was a knock at her cabin door. Thinking it was the cabin boy with fruit, Kit opened the door. Before she could stop him, Karl Branch had pushed his way in and slammed the door.

"Why, Karl!" she began, then she backed away, her blue eyes wide. Karl was quite, quite drunk. "Karl, get out of here! How dare you come here like this?"

Karl's face was purple, and his green eyes looked wild. He stumbled toward her and caught her in his arms, held her to him closely as she struggled.

"Lil' girls can't treat Karl this way," he said. "You've made a fool of me all trip and now you turn me down! You can't get away with that sort of thing. I'm mad about you. I want you."

He was a strong man, drunk and filled with wild desire for her. Kit was helpless and frightened as she had never been frightened before in her life.

"Let me go, I tell you, let me go!" she cried as he forced his lips on hers. Then she screamed. It was a long, shrill, frightened woman's scream; a bloodcurling scream that penetrated through Karl's drunkenness and made him let her go with a startled jerk. Instantly she was through the door and out in the corridor just as half a dozen passengers gathered there in answer to the scream.

FOR A MOMENT everyone was still, staring like people in trance, at Kit; at Karl behind her. Barns and Terry and Veree were standing in the corridor. The ex-countess and Megs and Phil were there. Nat and Teddy stared down from the companionway.

Kit didn't need to explain the scream. It was quite plain.

"Show's over," he mumbled. "You can all go back to bed."

Barns stepped forward, furious and indignant. He caught Kit by the shoulders and shook her.

"This is your fault, young lady!" he raged at her. "You've conducted yourself like a hussy ever since you got on this boat. I brought you along to catch up with my work and you've done nothing but flirt with every man on board. You are fired!"

Karl turned about and said, "Oh, let the girl alone. I was just sore because she refused to marry me. She

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can't help it if she's beautiful, can she?"

Veree said, "Really, Barns, the men have made a terrible play for Kit. She really couldn't help it."

Barns roared, "She's the one who has made a play! I've watched her, haven't I? She did her best to land Terry, until I finished that. She's fired!"

Barns went back into his cabin, slamming the door. Kit stood in her doorway, her chin up, frozen to the spot by the look in Terry's eyes.

"So you turned down Karl," he said. "He's a multi-millionaire, you know. Why did you do it?"

She was suddenly very tired. She had worked so hard and so long for what she thought she wanted. She had struggled and studied and fought. And now she had lost everything. She was broke, for she had spent her last cent for clothes for this trip. She was without a job. She had thrown away Terry's love, and turned down a millionaire. She was left with a double handful of nothing.

SHE WAS too tired to care what Terry thought any more, too tired to lie any more.

She said, "I guess it is pretty funny, Terry, but I turned down Karl because I love you."

She said it wearily, expecting him to laugh, but he didn't laugh.

"Let's get this straight," he said. "You love me? Is that right?"

She looked at him and nodded, tears falling over the long lashes.

"Ever since that first day. Oh, Terry, I couldn't let it go on and on, not when your uncle threatened to disinherit you! I loved you too much for that. I knew you'd hate me later. I knew . . ."

"Wait a minute," he said. "Suppose I was poor to start with. Suppose I was nobody at all and had no money. Would you love me then?"

"Oh, I wish you were poor!" She sighed. "Then nothing could keep me from loving you."

"Would you eat cabbage in a walk-up flat? Would you wear stockings from the ten cent store?"

"And love it! Oh, Terry, it's no use. I refuse to mess up your life."

"Darling, you don't have to mess up my life. Even if Uncle Barns does disinherit me, I've got a trust fund my grandmother left me—and a job. You might not be able to wear emeralds for everyday, but we wouldn't have to worry. Don't you think that would be enough for us, Kit, darling?"

She stared at him, understanding slowly. Terry was capable of taking care of himself. She wouldn't be messing up his life at all if she married him.

She said slowly, "Then your uncle—I thought he had all the money. I thought you would be penniless."

He caught her close in his arms.

"Stop trying to think," he said softly.

And then he kissed her, a long, slow kiss—a kiss that blotted out all the misunderstanding and promised a shining future. ♥ ♥ ♥

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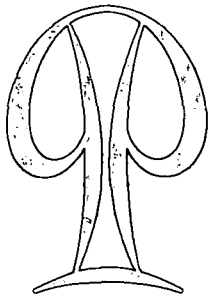

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